

## **Those Who Went Astray**

By: Yahya Al-Maqtul

Email: [yahya.al.maqtul@gmail.com](mailto:yahya.al.maqtul@gmail.com)

Word Count: 63,000 (without notes)

## Contents

Content Warnings .....	3
Terms .....	5
Chapter 1: Nearer to Him Than His Jugular Vein .....	29
Chapter 2: The All-Knower of What is in the Breasts.....	47
Chapter 3: The Footsteps of Shaitan.....	68
Chapter 4: You Are a People Who Behave Senselessly .....	79
Chapter 5: My Lord Has Humiliated Me.....	98
Chapter 6: There Has Come to You a Convincing Proof .....	118
Chapter 7: Those Who Earned Your Anger.....	138
Chapter 8: The Right Path Has Become Distinct from the Wrong Path.....	155
Chapter 9: Garments of Fire Will Be Cut Out for Them .....	176
Chapter 10: They Will Abide Therein Forever.....	192
Chapter 11: Signs for Those of Understanding.....	206
Notes and Bibliography .....	224
Last Page.....	262

## **Content Warnings**

This book deals with suicide, violence, trauma, hateful language, discrimination, slavery, and genocide. Some are briefly mentioned (slavery, genocide). I do not believe they will cause distress, but you should act according to your discretion. Others are engaged with directly (violence, discrimination) and consistently (suicide, trauma, hateful language). Act according to your judgement to ensure that you not engage with these issues in harmful ways.

I have listed content warnings for each chapter below. I tried to avoid details that could spoil the rest of this book, but keen readers may piece together the plot regardless. If spoilers are an issue, you may skip to the first chapter and use it as a gauge for your level of comfort with this book. If spoilers are not an issue, you may read the rest of this chapter. Chapter 1 deals with suicide, violence, religious trauma, hateful language, racism, queerphobia, slavery, and genocide. Chapter 2 deals with violence, religious trauma, hateful language, and queerphobia. Chapter 3 deals with suicide, hateful language, racism, sexism, and queerphobia. Chapter 4 deals with religious trauma, hateful language, and queerphobia. Chapter 5 deals with suicide, violence, religious trauma, hateful language, racism, and slavery. Chapter 6 deals with religious trauma, hateful language, racism, and queerphobia. Chapter 7 deals with suicide, religious trauma, medical trauma, hateful language, and queerphobia. Chapter 8 deals with suicide, violence, religious trauma, medical trauma, hateful language, racism, sexism, and queerphobia. Chapter 9 deals with suicide, violence, religious trauma, hateful language, racism, queerphobia, and

genocide. Chapter 10 deals with suicide, religious trauma, medical trauma, mental illness, hateful language, ableism, and genocide. Chapter 11 deals with suicide, violence, trauma, hateful language, and queerphobia.

## Terms

Note that where possible, the Arabic terms were defined using *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought* by Gerhard Böwering, Patricia Crone, and Mahan Mirza. There are also some terms that are defined according to the sources referenced when that term appears. Otherwise, all terms and their diacritical marks were generated using the author's own experiences alongside quick internet searches on websites like Wikipedia, so take them with a grain of salt. ChatGPT was also used to add diacritical marks. The *Qur'ānic* translations and transliterations were generated using the *Qur'ānic Arabic Corpus Word by Word Grammar, Syntax and Morphology of the Holy Quran*, along with the English translation from Muḥammad Taqī-ud-Din Al-Hilali and Muḥammad Muhsin Khan, and the various translations included on the website *Quran.com*. One could reference the site *Tanzil.net* for recordings of proper *Qur'ānic* recitation as well.

### Notable Verses from the *Qur'ān*:

Verse 3:190:

*Inna fī khalqī l-samāwāti wal-arḍi* (Indeed, in the creation of the heavens/sky and the earth) *wa-kh'tilāfī l-layli wal-nahāri* (and the alternation of the night and day) *laāyātin li-ulī l-albāb* (are signs for those of understanding).

Verse 3:191:

*Alladhīna yadhkurūna l-laha* (Those who remember *Allāh*) *qiyāman waqu 'ūdan wa 'alā junūbihim* (standing and sitting and on their sides) *wayatafakkarūna fī khalqī l-samāwāti wal-arḍ* (and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth), *rabbānā mā khalaqta hādhā bāṭilan* ([saying,] Our Lord, You have not created all this without purpose). *Sub'hānaka* (Glory be to You) *faqinā* (so save us) *'adhāba l-nār* (from the punishment of the Fire).

Verse 3:192:

*Rabbānā innaka man tud'khili l-nāra* (Our Lord, indeed whom You admit to the Fire) *faqad akhzaytah* (You have disgraced him), *wamā lilẓẓālimīna min anṣār* (and never will the wrongdoers find any helpers).

Verse 3:193:

*Rabbānā innanā sami 'nā* (Our Lord, indeed we heard) *munādiyan yunādī lil'īmāni* (a caller calling to the faith) *an āminū birabbikum faāmannā* ("Believe in your Lord," and we have believed). *Rabbānā fa-gh'fir lanā dhunūbanā* (Our Lord! Forgive us our sins) *wakaffir 'annā sayyiātinā* (and remove from us our evil deeds), *watawaffanā ma'a l-abrār* (and cause us to die with the righteous).

Verse 3:194:

*Rabbānā waātinā mā wa'adtanā 'alā rusulika* (Our Lord, grant us what You promised us through Your Messengers) *walā tukh'zinā yawma l-qiyāma* (and do not disgrace us on the Day of the Resurrection), *innaka lā tukh'lifū l-mī'ād* (indeed, You do not break Your Promise).

Verse 3:195:

*Fa-s'tajāba lahum rabbuhum* (Then responded their Lord), *Annī lā uḍī'u* (Never will I

allow to be lost) *‘amala ‘āmilin minkum* (the work of any of you) *min dhakarīn aw unthā* (whether male or female). *Ba ‘dukum min ba ‘d* (You are members one of another), *fa-lladhīna hājarū wa-ukh'rijū min diyārihim* (so those who emigrated and were driven out from their homes), *waūdhū fī sabīlī waqātalū waqutilū* (and were harmed in My Cause and who fought and were killed), *la-ukaffiranna ‘anhum sayyiātihim* (surely, I will remove from them their evil deeds), *wala-ud'khilannahum* (and surely I will admit them) *jannātin tajrī min taḥtiḥā l-anhār* (to Gardens under which rivers flow), *thawāban min ‘indi l-lah* (a reward from *Allāh*), *wal-lahu* (and *Allāh*), *‘indahū ḥus'nu l-thawāb* (with Him is the best reward).

Verse 3:196:

*Lā yaghurrannaka* (Do not be deceived) *taqallubu lladhīna kafarū fī l-bilād* (by the affluence of those who disbelieved in the land).

Verse 3:197:

*Matā ‘un qalīlun* (It is but a small enjoyment); *thumma mawāhum jahannam* (then their final refuge is Hell), *wabi'sa l-mihād* (and wretched is that place for rest).

Verse 3:198:

*Lākini lladhīna ttaqaw rabbahum* (But those who are mindful of their Lord), *lahum jannātun tajrī min taḥtiḥā l-anhāru* (will have gardens beneath which rivers flow), *khālidīna fīḥā* (abiding eternally therein), *nuzulan min ‘indi l-lah* (as accommodation from *Allāh*). *Wamā ‘inda l-lahi khayrun lil'abrār* (And that which is with *Allāh* is best for the righteous).

Verse 3:199:

*Wa-inna min ahli l-kitābi* (And indeed, among the People of the Scripture) *laman yu'minu*

*bil-lahi* (are those who believe in God) *wamā unzila ilaykum wamā unzila ilayhim* (in what has been sent down to you and in what was sent down to them), *khāshi ʿīna lillah* (humbling themselves before God). *Lā yashtarūna biāyāti l-lahi thamanan qalīla* (They do not sell God's revelation for a small price). *Ulāika lahum ajruhum ʿinda rabbihim* (These people will have their rewards with their Lord). *Inna l-laha sarīʿu l-ḥisāb* (Indeed, *Allāh* is swift in taking the account).

Verse 3:200:

*Yāayyuhā lladhīna āmanū* (O you who believe), *ṣʿbirū* (Be steadfast) *waṣābirū* (and be patient) *warābiṭū* (and be constant) *wa-ttaqū l-laha* (and be mindful of *Allāh*) *la ʿallakum tuḥliḥūn* (so that you may be successful).

(Part of) Verse 4:1:

*Yāayyuhā* (O) *l-nāsu* (mankind!) *ttaqū* (Fear) *rabbakumu* (your Lord) *-lladhī* (the One Who) *khalaqakum* (created you) *min* (from) *nafsin* (a soul) *wāḥidatin* (single) *wakhalaqa* (and created) *min'hā* (from it) *zawjahā* (its mate) *wabatha* (and dispersed) *min'humā* (from both of them) *rijālan* (men) *kathīran* (many) *wanisāan* (and women).

(Part of) Verse 4:15:

*Wa-llātī yatīna* (And those who commit) *l-fāḥishata* (sexual immorality) *min* (from) *nisāikum* (your women).

(Part of) Verse 4:16:

*Wa-lladhāni* (And the two who) *yatiyānihā* (commit it) *minkum* (among you).

(Part of) Verse 5:2:

*Wata ʿāwanū* (And help one another) *ʿalā l-biri* (in righteousness) *wa-taqwā* (and piety/righteousness), *walā ta ʿāwanū* (but do not help one another) *ʿalā l-ith'mi* (in sin)



*wal- 'ud'wān* (and transgression).

Verse 6:140:

*Qad* (Certainly), *khasira -lladhīna* (lost are those who) *qatalū awlādahum* (killed their children) *safahan bighayri 'il'm* (foolishly, without knowledge), *waḥarramū mā* (and forbidding that which) *razaqahumu l-lahu f'tirāan 'alā l-lah* (has been provided to them by *Allāh*—inventing lies against *Allāh*). *Qad ḍallū wamā kānū muh'tadīn* (Certainly, they have gone astray and were not guided).

Verse 7:81:

*Innakum* (Indeed, you) *latatūna* (approach) *l-rijāla* (the men) *shahwatan* (lustfully) *min-dūni* (instead of) *l-nisā'* (the women). *Bal antum qawmun mus'rifūn* (Nay, you are a people who commit excesses).

Verse 17:23:

*Waqadā rabbuka allā ta 'budū illā iyyāhu* (Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him) *wabil-wālidayni iḥ'sānan* (and that you be dutiful to your parents). *Immā yablughanna 'indaka l-kibara aḥaduhumā aw kilāhumā* (If one of them or both of them attain old age in your life) *falā taqul lahumā uffīn* (do not say so much as 'uff' to them) *walā tanharhumā waqul lahumā qawlan karīman* (nor shout at them but address them in terms of honour).

Verse 17:24:

*Wa-kh'fiḍ lahumā janāḥa l-dhul-li mina l-raḥmati* (And lower to them the wing of humility out of mercy) *waqul rabbi r'ḥamhumā kamā rabbayānī ṣaghīran* (and say, 'My Lord! Have mercy on both of them as they brought me up when I was small').

Verse 26:165:

*Atatūna* (Do you approach) *l-dhuk'rāna* (the males) *mina* (among) *l- 'ālamīn* (the worlds)?

Verse 26:166:

*Watadharūna* (And leave) *mā khalaqa lakum rabbukum* (those whom your Lord created for you) *min azwājikum* (to be your mates)? *Bal antum qawmun 'ādūn* (Nay, you are a people transgressing).

Verse 27:55:

*A-innakum* (Why do you) *latatūna* (approach) *l-rijāla* (the men) *shahwatan* (with lust) *min-dūni* (instead of) *l-nisā'* (the women)? *Bal antum qawmun tajhalūn* (Nay, you are a people ignorant).

(Part of) Verse 42:49:

*Yakhluqu mā yashāu* (He creates what He wills). *Yahabu liman yashāu* (He grants to whom He wills) *ināthan* (females), *wayahabu liman yashāu* (and He grants to whom He wills) *l-dhukūr* (the males).

(Part of) Verse 42:50:

*Aw yuzawwijuhum* (Or He grants them) *dhuk'rānan wa-ināthan* (both male and female).

Verse 96:1:

*Iq'ra bi-s'mi rabbika lladhī khalaq* (Read in the name of your Lord, who created).

### Notable *Hadīth*:

*Sunan Abū Dāwūd*, Book 34, *Hadīth* 12:

“*Man tashabbaha bi-qawmin fa-huwa minhum* (He who copies any people is one of them).

*Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, Book 77, *Ḥadīth* 5:

*Mā 'asfala* (Whatever is below) *mina l-ka 'bayni* (the ankles) *mina l-'izāri* (of the lower garment) *fa-fī al-nār* (is in the Fire).

*Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, Book 77, *Ḥadīth* 102–104:

*La 'ana Rasūlullāhi ṣallā-llāhu 'alayhi wa sallam al-mutashabbihīna mina r-rijālī bi'l-nisāi' wa-l-mutashabbihāti mina n-nisāi' bi'l-rijāl* (*The Prophet cursed those men who are in the similitude of women and those women who are in the similitude of men*).

*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Book 2, *Ḥadīth* 64–72:

*Aḥfū al-shawāriba wa-a 'fū al-liḥā* (Trim closely the moustache, and let the beard grow).

#### Terms (A–Z):

*3T*: Tin, Tantalum/Coltan, and Tungsten, which are conflict minerals used in electronics.

*Abu Dawud/Abū Dāwūd/Abū Dāwūd Sulaymān ibn al-Ash 'ath ibn Ishāq al-Azdī al-Sijistānī*: A scholar who died in 889 and who compiled the third of the six “canonical” *ḥadīth* collections recognized by *Sunnī* Muslims, the *Sunan Abu Dāwūd*.

*Abu Hanīfa/Abū Ḥanīfa/Hanafī/Ḥanafī*: A renowned Islamic scholar who died in 767 and who founded the *Ḥanafī* school of *fiqh*.

*Abu Hatim/Abu Ḥātim/Abū Ḥātim Muḥammad ibn Idrīs*: A notable *ḥadīth* scholar who died in d. 890.

*Abu Hurayrah/Abū Hurayra*: A *Ṣaḥāba* who died in 679 and who was and the most prolific *ḥadīth* narrator in *Sunnī* Islam.

*Abu Yusuf/Abū Yūsuf*: A key disciple of *Abū Ḥanīfa* who died in 798 and known for his *Kitāb al-Kharāj* on taxation and fiscal policy written for caliph *Hārūn ar-Rāshīd*.

*Abu Zur‘a*: A notable *ḥādīth* scholar who died in 883 (I did not find anything on them beyond Jahangir and Abdullatif).

*Adab*: Decency/morals/manners.

*Adibasi/Ādibāsi*: Aboriginal inhabitants of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh

*Ahadith/Aḥādīth*: Plural of *ḥadīth*.

*Ahmad Amin/Aḥmad Amīn*: An Egyptian historian who died in 1954 and known for his *Fajr al-Islām*, *Ḍuḥā al-Islām*, and *Zuhr al-Islām*.

*Ahmad ibn Hanbal/Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal/Ḥanbali*: A renowned Islamic scholar who died in 855 and who founded the *Ḥanbali* school of *fiqh*.

*‘Aib/‘Ayb /‘Ayb*: Defects.

*Akhlaq/Akhlaaq/Akhlāq*: Character.

*Al-A‘rāf*: The heights. In Islamic theology, refers to a place in-between heaven and hell. May be analogized to the Christian *Purgatory*, though it is unclear.

*Al-Bukhari/Al-Bukhārī/Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl ibn Ibrāhīm al-Ju‘fī al-Bukhārī*: A scholar who died in 870 and who compiled one of the two most *Ṣaḥīḥ* collections recognized by *Sunnī* Muslims, the *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*.

*Al-Daraqutni/Al-Darāquṭnī/‘Alī ibn ‘Umar al-Dāraquṭnī*: A scholar who died in 995 and who is *Darāquṭnī* known for compiling *ḥādīth* not covered by earlier collections.

*Al-Firdaus/Al-Firdaws*: The paradise/highest level of heaven.

*Al-Halabi/Al-Ḥalabī/Ibrāhīm Al-Ḥalabī*: A *Ḥanafī* jurist who died in 1549, noted for his *Multaqā al-Abḥur*.

*Al-Hawiya/Al-Hāwiya*: The abyss/pit/lowest level of *Jahannam*.

*Al ‘Imran/Āl ‘Imrān*: The Family of Imran.

*Al-Khalil Ibn Ahmad/Al-Khalīl Ibn Aḥmad*: An Arab lexicographer who died in 786 and known for his dictionary, *Kitāb al-ʿAyn*.

*Al-khunthā Al-Nafsiyya*: Psychologically intersex.

*Al-Luʿluʿi/Al-Luʿluʿī/Ḥasan Ibn Ziyād al-Luʿluʿī*: A *Ḥanafī* jurist who died in 819 (I did not find any information on them beyond Gesink).

*Al-Maʿida/Al-Māʿida*: The Table.

*Al-Marghinani/Al-Marghīnānī*: A renowned *Ḥanafī* jurist who died in 1196 and known for his legal manual *Al-Hidāyah*.

*Al-Nasai/Al-Nasaʿi/Al-Nasāʿī/Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Aḥmad ibn Shuʿayb ibn ʿAlī ibn Sinān ibn Baḥr ibn Dīnār al-Khurasānī al-Nasāʿī*: A scholar who died in 915 and who compiled one of the six “canonical” ḥadīth collections recognized by Sunnī Muslims, the *al-Sunan al-Ṣughrā/Sunan al-Nasāʿī*.

*Al-Nawawi/Abu Zakariya al-Nawawi/Abū Zakariyyāʿ al-Nawawī*: A prominent *Shāfiʿī* jurist who died in 1277 and known for his *Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn* and *al-Arbaʿīn al-Nawawiyya*.

*Al-Nuʿman/Al-Nuʿmān/Al-Qāḍī Al-Nuʿmān*: A prominent Fatimid *Ismāʿīlī Shīʿa* judge who died in 974 and known for his *Qāḍī al-Quḍāt* and *Dāʿī al-Duʿāt*.

*Al-Quduri/Al-Qudūrī*: A renowned *Ḥanafī* jurist who died in 1036 and known for his legal compendium *Mukhtaṣar al-Qudūrī*.

*Al-Qurtubi/Al-Qurtubī*: A renowned *Māliki* jurist who died in 1273 and known for his *Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*.

*Al-Ramli/Al-Ramlī/Khayr Al-Dīn Al-Ramli/Khayr Al-Dīn Al-Ramlī*: A Mufti in Ottoman Palestine who died in 1671 and whose expertise as a jurist was said to be so vast that lesser scholars sought his opinion.

*Al-Sarakhsi/Al-Sarakhsī/Muḥammad Ibn 'Aḥmad al-Sarakhsī*: A renowned *Ḥanafī* jurist who died in 1090 and known for his work *Al-Mabsūt*.

*Al-Sha'bi/Al-Sha'bī*: An early Islamic jurist who died in 722 (I did not find any information on them beyond Gesink).

*Al-Shafi'i/Al-Shāfi'ī/Shāfi'ī/Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī*: A renowned Islamic scholar who founded the *Shāfi'ī* school of *fiqh*.

*Al-Shaybani/Al-Shaybānī*: A key disciple of *Abū Ḥanīfa* who died in 805 and known for his *Kitāb al-Siyar*.

*Al-Thawri/Al-Thawrī*: The founder of the short-lived *Thawrī* legal school who died in 778.

*Al-Tusi/Al-Ṭūsī/Abū Ja'far Al-Ṭūsī*: A major *Shī'a* theologian and jurist who died in 1067 and known for his works like *Al-Mabsūt fī fiqh al-Imāmīyya*.

*Al-Zahrawi/Al-Zahrāwī/Abū Al-Qāsim Khalaf Ibn Al-'Abbās Al-Zahrāwī Al-Ansari/Abulcasis*:

An Andalusian physician, surgeon and chemist from who died in 1013 and who known for his influential medical encyclopedia, *Kitāb Al-Taṣrīf li-man 'ajiza 'an al-ta'ālīf*.

*Ali Al-Hadi/'Alī Al-Hādī*: The tenth *Imām* in *Twelver Shī'ism* who died in 868.

*Allah/Allāh*: God.

*Allah yastur/Allāh yastur*: May God protect us.

*Alhamdu lillah/Alḥamdu lillāh/Al-Hamdu lillah/Al-Ḥamdu lillāh*: Praise be to God.

*Aqaaid/Aqaa'id/'Aqā'id*: Belief.

*Arḍ*: Earth.

*Arsh/'Arsh*: Throne.

*Asr/'Aṣr*: The afternoon prayer.

*Astaghfirullah/Astaghfirullāh*: I seek forgiveness from *Allāh*.

*At-Tirmidhi/At-Tirmidhī/Muḥammad ibn ʿĪsā at-Tirmidhī*: A scholar who died in 892 and who compiled one of the six “canonical” *ḥadīth* collections recognized by *Sunnī* Muslims, the *Jami` at-Tirmidhi*.

*Awami League*: A major (at least until 2024) political party in Bangladesh representing the regional/literary/folk symbols of Bengali identity and the Bengali nation during the 1971 war for independence (since it was the most important party representing Bengali nationalism), though people may argue it has deviated from its original legitimacy.

*ʿAwrah/ʿAwrah/Awra/ʿAwra*: Parts of the body to cover.

*Āyah*: Sign, miracle, also a term for each verse in the *Qurʾān*.

*Azl/ʿAzl*: Coitus interruptus.

*Azwaj/Azwāj*: Spouses, plural of *zawj*.

*Bawn*: One of the *ādibāsi* ethnic groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

*Bidah/Bidʿah/Bida//Bidʿa/Bidʿa*: Heretical innovation.

*Blizkaia*: Close/intimate in Russian.

*BNP*: Bangladesh Nationalist Party, a major political party in Bangladesh representing the Islamic symbols/attitudes (without the theocracy) of Bangladeshi identity, created by General Ziaur Rahman.

*Bulugh/Bulūgh*: Puberty.

*Butros al-Bustani/Butrus al-Bustani /Buṭrus al-Bustānī*: A Lebanese writer who died in 1883 whose writing helped invigorate the Arab Renaissance (*Nahḍa*).

*Cayuga/Gayogohó:nqʼ*: People of the Great Swamp, an Iroquoian nation of North America originating in the Great Lakes region and belonging to the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

*Chakma*: One of the *ādibāsi* ethnic groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

*Chica Trans*: Trans girls.

*CMHC*: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.

*Da 'if/Da 'if*: Weak.

*Dhuk'rānan wa-ināthan*: Both male and female/a mix of males and females/both males and females/both, sons and daughters.

*Diwali/Dīpāvalī*: The Hindu festival of lights.

*Dua/Du'a/Du 'ā'*: Supplications to God.

*Escitalopram*: Anxiety medication.

*Estradiol*: Estrogen/feminizing hormone.

*Fahishah/Fahisha/Fāḥisha*: Sexual immorality.

*Fajr*: Dawn prayer.

*Falā taqul lahumā uffin*: Do not say so much as 'uff' to them/say no word that shows impatience with them.

*Fardh/Fard/Farḍ*: Obligatory.

*Fasad/Fasād*: Personal corruption.

*Fatwa/Fatwā*: Legal opinion .

*Fihi Nazar/Fīhi Naẓar*: One has to look into him.

*Fiqh*: Islamic law as understood/applied by mankind.

*Fitna*: Social discord.

*Fitrah/Fitra/Fiṭra*: Innate belief.

*Gad Al-Haqq/Gād Al-Ḥaqq*: An Egyptian Grand Mufti educated in Al-Azhar university who died in 1996 and who issued a 1981 *fatwā* on *SRS*.

*Geist*: Spirit, intellect, mind, consciousness.



*Hadith/Hadīth*: Sayings attributed to *The Prophet of Islam*.

*Hafiz/Hāfīz*: A person who memorized the *Qur'ān*.

*Hajj/Hajj*: Pilgrimage to Mecca.

*Halal/Halāl*: Permitted.

*Haram/Harām*: Forbidden.

*Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami Bangladesh/Harakah al-Jihād al-Islāmī Banglādes̄h*: Movement of Islamic Jihad in Bangladesh.

*Hasan/Hasan*: Fair.

*Hijra/Hijrā*: Third gender in South Asia, often composed of transgender women and intersex individuals. Is not connected to the migration of the *Prophet of Islam* from Mecca to Madinah in 622 CE (the *hijra/hijrah*) as far as I'm aware. Operates around discipleship lineages between *gurus* (teachers) and *chelas* (disciples).

*Hizb ut-Tahrir Bangladesh/Hizb al-Taḥrīr Banglādes̄h*: Party of Liberation in Bangladesh.

*Hudud/Hudūd*: Fixed punishment.

*Huron-Wendat/Wendat/Huron*: An Iroquoian nation of North America originating in the Great Lakes region.

*Ibn 'Abbas/Ibn 'Abbās*: A Ṣaḥāba who died in 687 and who was one of the cousins of *The Prophet*.

*Ibn Abi Layli/Ibn Abī Laylī*: A judge who died in 765 (I did not find any information on them beyond Gesink).

*Ibn Majah/Ibn Mājah/Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Yazīd Ibn Mājah*: A scholar who died in 887 and who compiled one of the six “canonical” *ḥadīth* collections recognized by *Sunnī* Muslims, the *Sunan Ibn Mājah*.

*Ibn Qudama/Ibn Qudāma*: A major *Ḥanbalī* jurist who died in 1223 and known for his *Al-Mughni*.

*Ibn Sina/Ibn Sīnā/Avicenna*: A philosopher and physician in the Muslim world who died in 1037.

*Ibn Umar/Ibn ‘Umar/‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb*: A *Ṣaḥāba* who died in 693 who was also the son of *‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb* (d. 644), the second Caliph of Islam.

*Ihram/Ihrām*: Sacred state when making the pilgrimage to Mecca.

*Ijtihad/Ijtihād*: Personal reasoning.

*Ikh’tilāf*: Alternation.

*Ikrimah/‘Ikrima/‘Ikrima/Abu ‘Abdi ‘llah ‘Ikrimah ibn ‘Abdi’illah*: The slave of the *Ṣaḥāba Ibn ‘Abbās* who died in 725.

*Imam/Imām*: Islamic leader, usually for congregational *ṣalāh* in a *Sunnī* context.

*Injil/Injīl*: The Gospels.

*Insha’Allah/Inshā’Allāh*: God-willing.

*Isnad/Isnād*: Chain of narration.

*Isha/‘Isha/‘Ishā’*: The night prayer.

*ITA*: International Tin Association.

*‘Itq/‘Itq*: Manumission.

*iTSCi*: International Tin Supply Chain Initiative.

*Jahannam*: Hell.

*Jahiliyya/Jāhiliyya*: The age of ignorance before the time of *The Prophet*.

*Jald*: Flogging.

*Jamaat-e-Islami*: Islamic Gathering, A minor political party in Bangladesh representing political Islamists and known for collaborating with Pakistan during the 1971 war for independence.

*Janazah/Janaza/Janāza*: The Funeral prayer.

*Jannah/Jannat/Jannāt*: Heaven.

*Jinn*: Spirits.

*Jumah/Jumu'ah/Juma/Jumu'a/Jumu'a*: The Friday prayer.

*Jumma/Jummā*: Political identity of the *ādibāsi* people of people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts region of Bangladesh, named for the *jhum* agricultural practice, not the Islamic Friday prayer.

*Jurji Zaydan/Jurjī Zaydān*: A Lebanese novelist who died in 1914 and who advocated for Arab nationalism.

*Kabiraji*: Indian deep-fried cutlet of fish, chicken, or mutton.

*Kālī Pūjā*: A festival dedicated to the Hindu goddess of death, *Kālī*.

*Kamis*: One of the *ādibāsi* ethnic groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

*Kānaka Maoli*: Full-blooded Hawaiians, Native Hawaiians/indigenous Polynesian people of Hawai'i.

*Kharijites/Khawārij*: Early heretical sect in Islam.

*Khomeini/Khomeinī/Ayatollāh Ruhollah Khomeini/Ayatollāh Rūḥollāh Khomeinī*: A high-ranking *Shi'i* cleric who became the supreme leader of Iran after the 1979 revolution.

*Khufi/Kufr*: Disbelief. *Qur'ān*

*Khumi*: One of the *ādibāsi* ethnic groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

*Khuntha/Khunthā*: Intersex people.

*Khuntha Gayr Al-Mushkil/Khunthā Gayr Al-Mushkil*: Intersex people of unambiguous sex.

*Khuntha Mushkil/Khunthā Mushkil*: Ambiguously intersex people/complex sex.

*Kohl/Koḥl/Kuhl/Kuḥl*: Eyeliner.

*Korenizatsiia*: Indigenization, the Soviet policy aiming to promote the development of local national cultures and languages in the non-Russian republics. It was also sometimes called *natsionalizatsiia* to emphasize the project of nation-building.

*Kufiyya/Kūfiyya/Keffiyah/Keffiyeh*: Middle eastern men's scarf.

*Kurta*: Knee-length South Asian tunic.

*Latatūna l-rijāla shahwatan min-dūni l-nisā'*: Approach the men lustfully instead of the women.

*Layl*: Night.

*LGBT/LGBTQ/LGBT+*: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, queer, and other minority identities like intersex, asexual, aromantic, etc.

*Li-ulī*: For men/for those.

*Liwat/Liwāt/Liwāṭ*: Sodomy.

*Loi Obama/Obama's law/Dodd-Frank*: Section 1502 of the 2010 Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, which stipulates that companies listed on US stock markets must disclose whether their supply chains involve 3T and gold sourced from eastern Congo or any neighboring country.

*Lungi*: South Asian men's "skirt" extending from the navel to the ankles.

*Lusheis*: One of the *ādibāsi* ethnic groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

*Madhab/Madhab/Madhahib/Madhāhib*: The schools of thought within *fiqh*.

*Madrasah/Madrasa*: Islamic school.

*Maghrib/Magrib/Maḡrib*: The sunset prayer.

*Makruh/Makrūh*: Reprehensible/Discouraged.

*Mala'ika/Malā'ika*: Angels.

*Malik ibn Anas/Mālik ibn 'Anas/Mālikī*: A renowned Islamic scholar who died in 795 and who

founded the *Mālikī* school of *fiqh*.

*Manga*: Japanese graphic novels.

*Manga/Maṅgā*: Near famines or a state of food scarcity, especially in rural areas of Bangladesh.

*Majar/Mājār/Mazaar/Mazar/Mazār*: Mausoleums/shrines of saints.

*Marmas*: One of the *ādibāsi* ethnic groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

*Maryam Mulk-Ara/Maryam Molkara/Fereydoon*: An Iranian Trans woman who approached *Khomeinī* in the 1970s and 1980s on the permissibility of SRS for them after facing workplace discrimination, which led to the 1980s appendages to *Khomeinī's fatwā*. They were born as *Fereydoon*.

*Masjid/Mosque*: A place/building where Islamic prayers are performed, usually in congregation.

*Matvii Iavorsky*: The head of *Ukrnauka*, the Ukrainian state body responsible for scholarship. He was also the head of the historical section of the *Ukrainian Institute of Marxism-Leninism* (UIML). *Iavorsky* never questioned the official Party line, which showed in his scholarship on the history of Ukrainian communism. He was still attacked for allegedly committing “nationalistic deviations” in interpreting Ukrainian history. He was purged in 1930, arrested in 1933, and executed by the *NKVD* in 1937.

*Mauna Kea*: White Mountain, tallest mountain in the Hawaiian Islands.

*Milk Al-Nikah/Milk Al-Nikāḥ*: Control and sexual access to the husband's wife.

*Milk Al-Yamin/Milk Al-Yamīn*: Control and sexual access to the master's concubine.

*Mississaugas of the Credit/Mazina'iga-ziibing Misi-zaagiwininiwag*: An Anishinaabe Algonquian nation of North America originating in the Great Lakes region. Note that there are other *Mississauga* nations, so this nation must be referred to as the *Mississaugas of the Credit* to be specific.

*Miswak/Miswāk*: Tooth-stick.

*Mohawk/Kanien'kehà:ka*: People of the flint, an Iroquoian nation of North America originating in the Great Lakes region and belonging to the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

*Monopsony/Monopsonic*: Markets with one legal buyer.

*Mubah/Mubāḥ*: Allowed.

*Muḥammad/The Prophet of Islam/The Prophet*: The founder of Islam and the proclaimer of the *Qur'ān*.

*Mukhannath*: Effeminate men.

*Mukhannath Khalqī/Mukhannath Khalqī*: Naturally effeminate.

*Mukththiru Al-Hadith/Mukththiru Al-Ḥadīth*: Prolific narrators of *ḥādīth*.

*Munāfiq/Munāfiq*: Hypocrite, false believer.

*Munāfiqun/Munāfiqūn*: Plural of *munāfiq*.

*Murungs*: One of the *ādibāsi* ethnic groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

*Musalla/Muṣallá*: A prayer hall smaller than a *mosque*.

*Musannaf/Muṣannaf*: Classified.

*Mutarajjila*: Masculine women.

*Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj/Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj/Abū al-Ḥusayn 'Asākir ad-Dīn Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj ibn Muslim*: A scholar who died in 875 and who compiled one of the two most *Ṣaḥīḥ* collections recognized by *Sunnī* Muslims, the *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*.

*Musnad*: Supported.

*Mustahabb/Mustaḥabb*: Desirable.

*Mykhailo Hrushevskyi*: The most distinguished Ukrainian historian who died in 1934, who is known for his multi-volume *History of Ukraine-Rus*, and for serving as the chairman of the

Central Rada (legislative body) of the short-lived 1917–1918 Ukrainian National Republic

*Nafs*: Base desires/lower self/ego/soul.

*Nafsu l-muṭ'ma-ina*: The soul that is at peace.

*Nafsi l-lawāma*: The soul that blames itself.

*Nafsa la-ammāratun bil-sū*: The soul that enjoins evil.

*Nahār*: Day.

*Naraka*: The hell realm in Indian religions.

*Narodnaia*: Popular.

*Nisai/Nisāi/Nisa/Nisā'*: Women.

*Normative Male Alexithymia*: Some men's limitations in expressing emotion due to masculine norms of socialization.

*Neutral Confederacy/Attawandaron*: A tribal confederation of Iroquoian peoples.

*Oahu/O'ahu /O'ahu*: The most populous of the Hawaiian Islands.

*Odawa*: An Anishinaabe Algonquian nation of North America originating in the Great Lakes region.

*Oneida/Onyota'a:ka*: People of the Upright Stone, an Iroquoian nation of North America originating in the Great Lakes region and belonging to the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

*Onondaga/Onoñda'gegá''*: People of the Hills, an Iroquoian nation of North America originating in the Great Lakes region and belonging to the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

*Pangkhua*: One of the *āḍibāsi* ethnic groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

*Petun/Tionontati*: People Among the Hills/Mountains, An Iroquoian nation of North America originating in the Great Lakes region.

*Poniatnaia*: Comprehensible.

*Progesterone*: Women's health hormone that might be controversial in trans healthcare.

*Qadi/Qāḍī*: Judge.

*Qari/Qāri*: A person who recites the *Qur'ān* with the proper rules of recitation.

*Qawa'id Al-Fiqh/Qawā'id Al-Fiqh*: Legal maxims in *fiqh*.

*Qibla*: Direction of prayer for Muslims.

*Qiyas/Qiyās*: Legal analogy.

*Quran/Qur'an/Qur'ān*: The sacred scripture of Islam, believed to be the literal word of God as revealed to the Prophet *Muḥammad* by the angel Gabriel.

*Rabbi r'hamhumā kamā rabbayānī ṣaghīran*: My Lord! Have mercy on both of them as they brought me up when I was small.

*Rabia/Rabia Al-Basri/Rābi'a Al-Basri*: A poet who died in 801, and who is one of the earliest *Ṣūfī* mystics.

*Raghba/Ragba*: Desire.

*Rajm*: Lapidation/stoning.

*Reangs*: One of the *ādibāsi* ethnic groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

*Riba/Ribā*: Interest.

*Rifa'a al-Tahtawi/Rifā'a al-Ṭaḥṭāwī*: An Egyptian intellectual who died in 1873 and who was among the modernist thinkers seeking to reinterpret the foundations of Islam and adopt certain elements of European civilization to push back against European encroachment.

*Rijāl*: Men.

*Rodnaia*: Native.

*Sahabah/Ṣaḥābah/Sahaba/Ṣaḥāba*: Companions of *The Prophet*.

*Sahifa/Ṣaḥīfa*: Booklet.



*Sahih/Ṣaḥīḥ*: Sound/authentic.

*Said ibn al-Musayyib/Saʿīd ibn al-Musayyib*: An authority of *fiqh* among the *Tābiʿūn* who died in 715.

*Sak*: One of the *ādibāsi* ethnic groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

*Sakatu ʿAnhu/Sakatu ʿAnhu*: Many remained silent concerning him.

*Salaḥī/Salaḥī/Salaḥī/Salaḥīyya*: A reform movement prioritizing the emulation of the first generation of Muslims.

*Salah/Ṣalāḥ*: Principal form of worship in Islam.

*Sally Mursi/Sayyid ʿAbd Allah/Sayyid ʿAbd Allāh*: An Egyptian Trans woman who got SRS in 1988 after being diagnosed with *Al-khunthā al-naḥsiyya*, before which she was known as *Sayyid ʿAbd Allāh*.

*Samāwāt*: Heavens/Sky.

*Seneca/Onöndowa'ga:*: Great Hill People, an Iroquoian nation of North America originating in the Great Lakes region and belonging to the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

*Serifeddin Sabuncuoglu/Şerifeddin Sabuncuoğlu*: A Turkish physician and surgeon who died in 1468 and who is known for his medical writings like *Cerrahiyyetu'l-Haniyye*.

*Shakila/Shākila*: Innate disposition, describing a person's inherent qualities or natural temperament.

*Shariah/Shariʿah/Sharia/Shariʿa/Shariʿa*: Islamic ethics/principles, encompassing the religious, moral, and legal guidelines that govern the lives of Muslims.

*Shayatin/Shayāṭīn*: Demons.

*Shia/Shiʿa/Shīʿa/Shii/Shiʿi/Shīʿī*: The second-largest Islamic sect, whose followers believe that the legitimate leadership of the Muslim community should pass through the family of the

Prophet *Muḥammad* via his cousin and son-in-law, 'Alī.

*Shonen Anime/Shōnen Anime*: Japanese animations for boys and adolescent men.

*Sihaq/Sihāq*: Tribadism.

*Sira/Sīrah/Sira Al-Nabawiyya/Sīra Al-Nabawiyya*: The biography of *The Prophet*.

*Shirk*: Associating partners with God.

*Spironolactone*: Anti-androgen hormone.

*SRS*: Sex-reassignment surgery/surgeries.

*Subhanah Wa Ta'ala/Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala/Subḥānahu Wa Ta'ālā*: Exalted and glorified is He.

*Sufi/Şūfī*: Islamic mystics.

*Sultan/Sulṭān*: The title for sovereign rulers in Muslim countries that do not claim dominion over the entire Islamic caliphate.

*Sunna/Sunnah*: Practices of the *Prophet of Islam*.

*Sunni/Sunnī*: Dominant Islamic sect.

*Surah/Sura/Sūra*: Chapter.

*Tabii/Tabi'i/Tābi'ī/Tabi'un/Tābi'ūn*: The generation of Muslims who followed the *Ṣaḥāba*.

*Tabi Tabii/Tabi' Tabi'i/Tābi' At-Tābi'ī/Tabi'ū Al-Tabi'īn*: The generation of Muslims who followed the *Tābi'ī*.

*Taif/Ta'if/Tā'if*: A city in Arabia.

*Tabia/Tabi'a/Ṭabī'a*: Genetics/Innate disposition.

*Tafsir/Tafsīr*: *Qur'ānic* Exegesis.

*Talaq/Ṭalāq*: Divorce.

*Tanchaungs*: One of the *ādibāsi* ethnic groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

*Tantawi/Ṭanṭāwī/Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi/Muḥammad Sayyid Ṭanṭāwī*: An Egyptian Sheikh

educated in Al-Azhar university who died in 2010 and who issued a 1988 *fatwā* on *SRS* regarding a trans woman named *Sally Mursi*.

*Taqallubu*: Movement/prosperity/lucrative trading/vicissitude/free disposal and affluence.

*Tarakuhu/Tarakūhu*: Abandoned.

*Ṭayyibāti*: Good/pure things.

*Tazir/Ta'zir/Ta'zīr*: Discretionary punishment.

*Thawb*: Arab ankle-length robe.

*Tipperas*: One of the *ādibāsi* ethnic groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

*Topi/Ṭopī*: Round skullcap.

*Ttaqaw rabbahum*: Are mindful of their Lord/fear their Lord.

*Tuhfatush Shabaab/Tuhfatu Shabāb*: A Gift for the Youth, often used as a title for books or speeches aimed at young people.

*Tuscarora/Skarù:rəʔ*: An Iroquoian nation of North America originating in the Carolinas and belonging to the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

*Ulama/'Ulama/'Ulamā'*: Islamic scholars.

*Ummah*: The Islamic religious community/nation.

*Volksgeist*: National spirit, spirit of a nation.

*Waikiki/Waikīkī*: A *Honolulu* neighborhood on the south of the island of *O'ahu*.

*Wajib/Wājib*: Obligatory.

*Warabitu/Warābiṭū*: And be constant.

*Wasabiru/Waṣābirū*: And be patient.

*Wattaqullaha/Wa-ttaqū l-laha*: And be mindful of *Allāh*/and fear *Allāh*.

*Waswas*: Whisperings of Satan, often described as doubts, evil suggestions, or distractions that

lead one away from righteous behavior.

*Weltgeist*: World spirit/universal world spirit.

*Wudhu/Wudu/Wuḍū'*: Ritual ablution performed by Muslims before prayer and certain other acts of worship, involving the washing of specific body parts.

*Ya Allah/Yā Allāh*: O God, commonly used in supplications and expressions of emotion or distress in Islamic culture.

*Yadu l-Lahi*: The Hand of *Allāh*.

*Yahya ibn Ma'in/Yahyā ibn Ma'īn*: A notable *ḥadīth* scholar who died in 852.

*Yama/Yāma*: The god of death in Indian religions.

*Zaker Party*: A minor *Śūfī*-led Bengali political party.

*Zalimin/Zālimīn/Zalimun/Zālimūn*: Wrongdoers/polytheists.

*Zawj*: Spouse.

*Zina/Zinā*: Fornication/adultery.

*Zina l- 'Aynayni n-Nazar/Zinā l- 'Aynayni n-Nazar*: The *zinā* of the eyes through the lustful gaze.

## Chapter 1: Nearer to Him Than His Jugular Vein

To keep a secret, one must believe it does not exist.

Ten years ago, I started engineering my life around that Promise. I was sitting at the glass dining table of the three-bedroom apartment we used to live in. I imagined what it would be like if I told Him the truth once He returned from the *'Ishā' ṣalāh* (night prayer). On the other side of the table, His great white beard and milk-white *thawb* (Arab ankle-length robe) appeared like an immovable marble pillar. His imposing figure made the worst-case scenario come so easily to my imagination.

“You are my son, Yahya!” He roared. “Why are you listening to *waswas* (whisperings of Satan)? You’re thinking like a stupid idiot!”

I reminded myself that this was not who He was. He was a reasonable person who would listen if I found the right words to say. We believed in the laws of Islam, and this belief became a neurotic reordering of our lives. What I could eat. What I could wear. What I could see. Who I could meet. Who I could love. Who I could be. Every aspect of my life was subject to scrutiny as I relentlessly asked myself if what I wanted to do was *ḥalāl* (permitted) or *ḥarām* (forbidden). I would then question the sources for this ruling, asking if the sources are trustworthy, how the sources are interpreted, if there are inconsistencies in interpretation, and if there are alternative interpretations. Only by becoming the dutiful pious son who listened to his father and abstained from sex and drugs could I make Him proud in this country.

But for once I did not act like His righteous son. I did not go with Him to the local *muṣallá* (a prayer hall smaller than a *mosque*) for the ‘*Ishā*’ congregation on that day. My religious garb, a plain black *thawb* and *ṭopī* (round skullcap), was fitting for a son of pious humility. But on me, it was always accompanied by a growing headache, as if a wire was slowly tightening around my skull. The headache was so great that He took notice of me massaging my temples after every *ṣalāh* (principal form of worship in Islam), booking a doctor’s appointment the next day to get it checked. He was always concerned for my health. But the palm He placed on my forehead, His interrogatory questions, and the slew of syrups and damp towels He gave me were useless. The doctor would not find anything either, so He would ultimately know nothing. Not unless I revealed a secret that was kept hidden all my life. He had an old-fashioned sensibility since He was born a decade after the second World War, so I thought about broaching the subject with a smaller issue. If I found the right words, He would be convinced.

I probably had twenty minutes to figure out what to say before He returned from ‘*Ishā*’. Again, I imagined Him on the other side of the glass dining table, His wrinkled face a tender image of concern reflecting the father who doted on His child. He would listen if I found the right words.

“I must tell you something,” I said. “Something is wrong with me.” He raised His eyebrows, the way one would when learning a friend has come down with a sickness.

“What’s going on?” He asked. “Is it something about university?” I shook my head.

“What is it?”

I did not answer.

“Come on, talk to me,” He said, His voice softening. “We should not keep any secrets. We should be as close as this.” He raised the index and middle finger of His right hand and

joined them together, their closeness symbolizing our own closeness. I chose my words carefully.

“I want to make you happy, but to do that, I ... need to be unhappy.”

“Why would you think that?” He asked. It was like telling Him I needed to go to the moon.

“I would never want you unhappy,” He declared.

“It is because of ... my face,” I said. “The hair looks dirty and ugly. It needs to go.”

He cocked His head in confusion before grabbing my jaw to inspect it.

Personal space is not a very strong concept among South Asian cultures. He was the eldest of nine children, so He was socialized in a way that regarded the casual invasion of space as an expected part of family. But that did not reduce my discomfort, raised in this country as an only-child. The sensation of His fingers reminded me that I was a cross between a rat and a goat. The hair was thin and wiry, curling like misshapen coils. They covered my cheeks and chin in messy patches which I yearned to tear out. The skin underneath was rough and bumpy too, acne and ingrown hairs festering like a virulent fungus.

“It looks fine,” He said.

“I could take better care of the skin if I could see it properly,” I replied. “There are bumps and pimples hidden under the hair.”

“Come on,” He said in that familiar tone of exasperation bordering on disappointment. His tone got like that whenever I said or did something that seemed like I had a mental deficiency. I never quite got used to it.

“How many times have I told you, ‘Comb and oil your face and beard after you take a shower?’” He chuckled, pointing at all the combing and oiling He did for His own white beard,

which had grown long and straight down to His sternum, appearing like a Bengali version of Santa Claus. He did not have a big pot belly though because of all His physical activity working on the apartment. He stood up to get a bottle of baby oil for demonstration, but I grabbed His wrist.

He did not take the hint. The lump in my throat threatened to choke me. He could easily cite the verses of the *Qur'ān* (the sacred scripture of Islam) forbidding one from changing the creation of God and that would be the end of it. I had to pay careful attention to my words, each one a potential mine.

\*\*\*

“I want it shaved,” I said.

He was taken aback.

“This is forbidden. The beard is the *Sunnah* (practices of the *Prophet of Islam*).”

It is considered a good deed to imitate *The Prophet of Islam* since *The Prophet* embodies everything an ideal Muslim should strive towards. Some *Sunnah* are optional, but for some people, the *Sunnah* are a demonstration of one's faith and commitment to Islam, and so may become de facto *farḍ* (obligatory). For such people, there should be a rigid border separating the “authentic” Muslims who take religion seriously, and the “fashion statement” Muslims, for whom Islam is nothing more than pretty clothes, pretty architecture, pretty calligraphy, and the vapid countercultural spirituality fitting for white hippies.

An example of this appeared when I used to tie my hair back in a ponytail. He took me aside and lectured for an hour on the men in the *Jāhiliyya* (the age of ignorance before the time of *The Prophet*). He often lectured for more than an hour, going on many tangents. The gist of this lecture was that the men in Arabia before the time of *The Prophet* tied their hair back to



show off their tribal pride, and this tribal pride helped contribute to the long, pointless blood feuds that plagued pre-Islamic Arabia. The *Sunnah* changed this, keeping the hair even and down to the earlobes or shoulders. I was tired by the time His lecture ended, so I just told Him I understood, after which He kissed my forehead and said that I was the best son in the entire world. I went for a full shave. He protested, insisting that I keep at least a centimeter. But I did not want to think about this issue at all anymore, so I removed any ambiguity over which side of the border I was on.

“I only want to be a good Muslim,” I said to demonstrate due respect.

He looked into my soul with stern and loving concern. “The authentic *ḥadīth* (sayings attributed to *The Prophet of Islam*) are very clear,” He said while grabbing His phone to find these *ḥadīth* on the internet. Once He found them, he scrolled down to read the Arabic and English translation. In doing so, His spiritual authority became unquestionable.

“*Man tashabbaha bi-qawmin fa-huwa minhum*,” He recited. “He who copies any people is one of them.”

“*La ‘ana Rasūlullāhi ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam al-mutashabbihīna mina r-rijāli bi’l-nisāi’ wa-l-mutashabbihāti mina n-nisāi’ bi’l-rijāl*. *The Prophet* cursed those men who are in the similitude of women and those women who are in the similitude of men.”

“*Aḥfū al-shawāriba wa-a’fū al-liḥā*. Trim closely the moustache, and let the beard grow.”

The rules laid out by these *ḥadīth* were clear. A Muslim cannot shave his facial hair. It would defy the advice of *The Prophet*, it would be an imitation of non-Muslims, and it would be an imitation of the opposite gender. The border was firmly defined and heavily policed. But I hoped to cross it legally.

*Ḥadīth* are records of what *The Prophet of Islam* told his *Ṣaḥāba* (Companions of *The*

*Prophet*). The idea is that *The Prophet* passed on his *Sunnah* to the *Ṣaḥāba*, who verbally and culturally passed it on to the next generation (the *tābi* 'ī) by recalling *ḥadīth* from memory, who did the same with the next generation (the *tābi* 'at-tābi 'ī), until these *ḥadīth* were recorded on paper in the third century of Islam for experts to reference. Many are now digitally recorded on the internet for contemporary Muslims to reference too.

Some people write off *ḥadīth* as an intergenerational game of broken telephone plagued by errors in transmission. That argument does not work with orthodox Muslims. Rejecting *ḥadīth* conceptually is tantamount to rejecting Islam in their eyes. I read about *ḥadīth* to acquire a more nuanced view, but what I found generally supported orthodoxy. According to Mohammad Hashim Kamali's 2005 book, *A Textbook of Ḥadīth Studies: Authenticity, Compilation, Classification and Criticism of Ḥadīth*, some of these *ḥadīth* were written down ad hoc by some of the *Ṣaḥāba* in *Ṣaḥīfa* (booklet) collections. In Islam's second century, scholars started thematically classifying *ḥadīth* in *Muṣannaf* (classified) collections, and in Islam's third century, scholars started paying attention to the *isnād* (chain of narration) of *ḥadīth*, creating the *Musnad* (supported) compilations like those of *Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal* (d. 855). Then rules of verification were applied to remove questionable *ḥadīth* (i.e.: can one prove that two transmitters in a chain of narration met one another), creating the *Ṣaḥīḥ* (sound/authentic) compilations trusted by Muslims today like *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*.

The *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* collection allegedly took 600,000 *aḥādīth* (plural of *ḥadīth*) and reduced them to 9,082 (2,602 discounting repetitions) authentic ones, which was verified by the leading 'ulamā' (Islamic scholars) of that time. The *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* collection reduced 300,000 *aḥādīth* to 10,000 (3,030 discounting repetitions). The *Sunan Abū Dāwūd* collection reduced 500,000 *aḥādīth* to 5,274 (4,800 discounting repetitions), which included both *Ṣaḥīḥ* and *Ḥasan*

(fair) *ḥadīth*. The *Ibn Mājah* and *Tirmidhi* collections includes *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Ḥasan*, and *Daʿīf* (weak) *ḥadīth*. Faced with this overwhelming level of scholarship, I could perhaps question *ḥadīth* from the compilations authored by *at-Tirmidhi* (d. 892) and *Ibn Mājah* (d. 887), but to argue against the authenticity of *ḥadīth* from the compilations authored by *Abū Dāwūd* (d. 889), *Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj* (d. 875), and *al-Bukhārī* (d. 870), I would need a PhD in *ḥadīth* analysis. Only then could I cross the border without breaking any complicated and esoteric laws.

\*\*\*

“What do you think I should do?” I asked.

“The answer is clear,” He declared. “Our *nafs* (base desires/lower self/ego/soul) pave the way to *Jahannam* (hell). We must suppress them. If I am angry, do I act on it? Of course not. I must suppress my anger and channel it towards good deeds, and if I remain steadfast, *inshāʾAllāh* (God-willing), we will be rewarded. Like a flame starved of air, the *nafs* will naturally go away with time.”

I wanted to believe the analogies He espoused, but the scientific scholarship on this misunderstanding of psychology is clear. A 2022 literature review found that LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, queer, and other minority identities like intersex, asexual, aromantic, etc.) youths who experienced conversion therapy had far worse outcomes than those who did not experience conversion therapy, who in-turn had far worse outcomes than those who received affirmative therapy. Conversion therapy is associated with greater anxiety/psychological distress (47% vs 34% vs 20%), depression (65% vs 27% vs 14%), substance abuse (67% vs 50% vs 26%), and attempted suicide (63% vs 22% vs 3%). The authors of the literature review used an economic model to calculate the economic burdens of these outcomes. Conversion therapy costs \$97,985 per individual, totalling \$9.23 billion in the US. Affirmative therapy’s benefits outweigh

its costs, saving \$40,329 per individual on average, saving \$1.81 billion in the US.

This is not surprising. The human mind is not a flame. When it is starved and suppressed, its dispositions do not disappear. They transform, and this transformation is healthy or not depending on the mental pathologies that lead a person to bend their mind in that way. One person can suppress their anger and healthily channel it towards good deeds because they convinced themselves that their anger is best used building themselves and others up. Another person can do the exact same thing but be entirely unhealthy because they convinced themselves that their anger is worthless and evil. I should be thankful that I did not have to worry about institutionalized conversion therapy, which would have undoubtedly made everything worse. But I did not have to worry about that because I was always suppressing my *nafs*, leading me to wonder if the costs of illegally crossing the border exceeded \$97,985.

He got up from the table and went to my side to hug me, asking me if I understood.

“No,” I answered.

While I lack the expertise to question *ḥadīth* themselves, perhaps I could question the way He applies them, and in doing so make Him change the border.

“If Western culture changes so that pink becomes manly and green becomes womanly, would it become permissible to wear pink and impermissible to wear green?” I asked Him. “If their men had long beards and trimmed their moustaches and wore our clothes, would it become forbidden for us to continue wearing these clothes to avoid imitation? Why should we have to depend on Western culture so much?”

He stroked His beard while thinking about what I said.

“There are specific rulings established by the *Qur’ān* and *ḥādīth*,” He answered. “How to keep the hair. What parts of the body to cover (*‘awrah*). Who wears jewellery. Regardless of

whatever Western culture does, the most important thing is following the authentic *ḥadīth*.”

He would focus more on defining a specific Muslim border that I could not cross than on clarifying the limits of a Western border. If the Muslim border entered Western territory, that might be nice, barring the risk that they use it as an opportunity to hijack Islamic culture. But the other way around would be an intolerable incursion into Muslim territory, and a true Muslim must maintain the integrity of whatever ideological territory Islam has left.

Perhaps I could cross the border by clarifying different levels of border security.

“Does the *ḥadīth* state if the beard is *farḍ*, *sunnah*, or *mubāḥ* (allowed)?” I asked.

*Fiqh* (Islamic law as understood/applied by mankind) categorizes actions into five general categories: *ḥarām*, *makrūh* (reprehensible/discouraged), *mubāḥ*, *sunnah/mustaḥabb* (recommended), and *farḍ/wājib* (obligatory), with some variation in terms depending on the legal scholar. Muslims nowadays often downplay the relevance of these categories, defaulting to a rigid *ḥalāl–ḥarām* dichotomy on most subjects. For them, the border must be all-or-nothing. You are either a citizen, or you are not. There can be no ambiguity.

He told me that the wording of the *ḥadīth* determines the category. He quoted one as a demonstration, stating that “the acts according to *fiṭra* (innate belief)” are “clipping the moustache, letting the beard grow, using the tooth-stick (*miswāk*), snuffing water in the nose, cutting the nails, washing the finger joints, plucking the hair under the armpits, shaving the pubes and cleaning one’s private parts with water.” Since belief is connected to these acts, it must be *farḍ* to maintain the beard and trim the moustache.

Perhaps an inconsistency in border security would work in my favour.

“What about circumcision?” I asked. “The *Qur’ān* and *ḥadīth* forbids one from needlessly changing the creation of God with things like tattoos, so why would circumcision

remain mandatory when modern hygiene and medicine nullified its benefits?”

There is an inconsistency in Muslim criticisms of tattoos and body modifications as unnecessary and unnatural desecrations of the body. Muslims are already unnecessarily unnatural. For the *fiqh* to remain consistent, they must prioritize one over the other (in some *ḥadīth*, circumcision is included as a sign of *fiṭra*). If He did prioritize naturalness, I could make an argument that circumcision, the *miswāk*, the beard, and the moustache are all *mustaḥabb* or *mubāḥ*.

“What is important is following the tradition of the prophets,” He answered without hesitation. “All the prophets were circumcised, so it is mandatory for Muslims so long as their health and wellbeing are not at stake. A true believer will do everything *The Prophet* did.”

The Prophetic tradition overrules everything else regardless of the relevance of the rationale behind that tradition. That was how He could criticize tattoos without sensing a contradiction from circumcision. To be clear, the health and wellbeing caveats do not include mental health. Pray your way to happiness, and do not cross the border.

All that leaves is a controversial argument.

“What about slavery?” I asked.

His face went blank.

“The *Qur’ān* permits slavery, and *The Prophet* and his *Ṣaḥāba* accepted it in society and war. So why would it be permissible to outlaw slavery from Islam and the Muslim world now while forcing circumcision and controlling people’s hair by arguing that *The Prophet* did these things?”

He furrowed his eyebrows.

“Stop asking these strange questions,” He snapped.

\*\*\*

I realized then that logic would not work. I hoped that contemplating the *Qur'ān* and *aḥādīth* would lead me to a loophole that could facilitate a legal crossing of the border, or at least strengthen my religiosity. All it really did was reveal the irrationality behind the *fiqh*. The rules and principles contradicted each other, and everyone reinterpreted the contradictions according to what justified their preexisting beliefs.

I'm not supposed to imitate non-Muslims, and I'm not supposed to imitate the other gender, but everyone else decides when something becomes an imitation and how strictly Muslims must separate themselves from others to avoid imitation. I'm not supposed to alter the creation of God, so I must curse tattooists, plastic surgeons, and transgender people. Except when I alter the bodies of infant boys. Then I'm just reducing the risk of disease, even if the risk of surgical complications, the pain, the lack of consent, and the benefits of modern hygiene and medicine make circumcision a moot point for rich countries. I must curse transgender people for arrogantly satisfying their depraved desires over the wisdom inherent in God's creation, even as I forcefully alter intersex infants to satisfy my faith in the gender binary. I'm supposed to strictly follow the Prophetic tradition even when the rationale behind the *ḥadīth* is void. Except when something like slavery is politically reprehensible. Then the *Sunnah* is suddenly so flexible and bound by historical circumstances. But only on that issue. Everything else in the *Sunnah* is strict and universal. I was the only fool who believed this legal system provided consistency and integrity, sacrificing my mind and soul just to maintain someone else's barely hidden ideology.

Of course, my sacrifice was paltry compared to His. While we are not as opulent and consumerist as the average white North American, our lives are no doubt privileged compared to other South Asian immigrants. The apartment's facilities functioned adequately, the pests were

not that concerning (He used caulk to seal every crack where a roach could hide), there was not much crime in the neighborhood, everything we needed was walkable, we had decent access to public services, we were relatively close to a *mosque* (a place/building where Islamic prayers are performed) and a walkable local *muşallá* in a shopping plaza, and we were relatively close to downtown. This apartment had everything for a life worth living so long as one ignored the corruption and mismanagement typical in condominiums.

This was no accident. I am not the immigrant. He and His wife are. They are the ones who moved to this country. They are the ones who worked backbreaking jobs day in and day out to get here. When I was born, we lived in a neighborhood with a sizable number of Bengali immigrants. We moved a couple times in the following years, though I was too young to recall these memories, and by the time I entered the third grade, we settled in this apartment. Pakistani and East Asian immigrants were predominant in this neighborhood, but that was not a significant issue, especially considering all the effort He expended turning this apartment into a home. Everywhere I looked held thousands of hours of labour. The green walls, the hardwood floor, the fridge and dining table, the windowsill which held a collection of potted plants. It all contained his sweat, expended to create a home that was better and cheaper than if He had hired someone else to get it done. It felt impossible to reveal that secret while I was surrounded by everything testifying to the sacrifices He made for my sake. His wife did not appreciate it, though.

Maybe if I was more honest and direct, things would be different. I imagined a different approach to our conversation. This time He was sitting in a chair next to me, and I poured my heart out the way I imagined children who trusted their parents might.

\*\*\*

“Doesn’t everything we believe seem so ... new?” I asked. “A couple centuries ago,



things like slavery and child labour were unavoidable because there was no other way of maintaining large civilizations. But now we reject these things because we live in a world where machines can do a lot of that work.”

His face remained stone-cold, completely indecipherable, but I kept going.

“Do you ever wonder if the way we feel about slavery will be the same way Muslims in a thousand years will feel about other things too? What if they live in a world where they can grow all their meat in laboratories? Will this make them believe that it is categorically *ḥarām* to kill or eat any animals? What if they live in a world where war between countries is no longer relevant to pursuing justice. Will this make them believe that war is categorically *ḥarām*? What if they live in a world where all criminals can be reformed? Will this make them believe that it is *ḥarām* to whip, imprison, or execute a criminal? What if Muslims in a thousand years live in a time when boys do not need to grow beards and trim moustaches and call themselves men?”

“*Astagfirullāh* (I seek forgiveness from *Allāh*),” He spat immediately, the whites of His eyes bulging out in anger.

“This is stupid,” He cursed.

“This is insane,” He cursed.

“This is a Western ideology,” He condemned.

I decided then that His kind would never listen to me.

“Oh, come on,” I spat back. “If you were born four hundred years in the past, you would probably believe it was *ḥarām* to outlaw slavery because the *Qur’ān* forbids us from making something *ḥalāl* into something *ḥarām*.”

He clicked His tongue at this speculative accusation, getting up to pace the room.

“If you were born four hundred years in the future,” I continued, “you might believe

homophobia is *ḥarām* because the *Qur'ān* says that God does not burden a person beyond their capacity, that God commands us to stand for justice, and the verses which condemn homosexuality only truly condemn sexual assault and adultery. You might even write off all the homophobic *ḥadīth* as inauthentic too.”

“What kind of Muslim compares morality to slavery?” He roared, His face curling into a mask of disgust. “This is *bid‘a* (heretical innovation). This is *kufr* (disbelief).”

I clicked my tongue, standing up to face Him.

“In the *fiqh*, marriage was understood using analogies to slavery. The husband’s dower granted him control and sexual access to the husband’s wife (*milk al-nikāḥ*), which also granted him unilateral right over divorce (*ṭalāq*).”

“I’ve been far too lenient,” He lamented while ignoring what I said.

“The master’s purchase granted him control and sexual access to the master’s concubine (*milk al-yamīn*), which also granted him unilateral right over manumission (*‘itq*).”

He massaged His temples to deal with the pain.

“I should have sent you to a real *madrasah* (Islamic school) in Arabia. I should have not allowed you to touch these Western devices and look at their books and movies and media. I should control everything you read and watch and listen to so that you turn back into a real Muslim.”

I tried exposing the insanity behind this appeal to authenticity.

“Sexual morality back then did not even consider consent or equality that important. How can the equal, consensual, and monogamous marital morals promoted by modern Muslims be anything less than *bid‘a*? How can we pretend to have ever been ‘authentic’ at any point in time?”

He did not give my reasoning a momentary thought.

“From now on, you will recite the *Qur’ān* every morning and night in front of me. We will go to a real Muslim country. You will pray every *ṣalāh* at the *masjid* (synonym for *mosque*) next to me, and you will pray and repent, and they will make you stop thinking like a crazy person.”

“Crazy person?” I asked incredulously. “I’m the only person I know who didn’t drive themselves insane by trying to veil their emotions in logic while pretending that it made me righteous.”

I paced the room, the energy in my body wound like a spring with nowhere to go. I flicked my fingers in my hands to release the excess energy, but it was not enough. Not even the hypocrisy of angrily proclaiming that I was not driven by emotion could make me calm down.

“It was all a lie!” I yelled. “Your people constantly bend your faith to pass off your emotions as God’s commands. I could have bent my faith at any point just like the rest of you, yet here I foolishly believed that my sacrifices would somehow convince you to do the same.”

“*Yā Allāh* (O God),” He groaned. “I broke my back supporting you and our family back home. If you turn on the news right now you will see children losing their lives because of evil people that want to destroy the *ummah* (the Islamic religious community/nation). How did I allow you to become so ungrateful? I should kick you from this house to make you learn respect.”

I clicked my tongue, burning with anger.

“I used to dream that one day I would be loved for who I was, too stupid to realize that day will never come. Your kind will always turn me into someone who doesn’t feel anything, who doesn’t want anything, who doesn’t believe in anything.”

These prejudicial words borne from pain did not make me feel better. Instead, they incensed something much colder and crueller, something which hated everything that exists.

“If your kind was wiped off the face of the earth, the only thing I would feel was envy that I did not join you.”

His eyes bulged out of His head. His hands, callused from decades of carpentry, reached out to me. He would not hit me, I think, even when filled with fury. But it was too late. It was all too real. It was all too predictable. It was all in my imagination, but my fist launched forwards anyways.

\*\*\*

Pain radiated from my hand where it connected with the concrete wall. I collapsed on a couch, my head in my hands.

There were no right words to make Him listen. If He has an inkling about what I was, He will clamp down. If I push back with what I learned, He will turn it back on me and shut down any controversial comparisons. If I was honest with Him, He will make me regret it for the rest of my life, and I will not be strong enough to stop the worst parts of myself from lashing out.

There was only one real option.

“He cannot be allowed to have an inkling,” I told myself. “He cannot know a single thing about me. He must not have any reason to search for who I am. He must believe there are no secrets between us.”

That was the best way to keep a secret. If He does not have a clue that a secret exists in the first place, He will have no reason to probe me for secrets or police the borders around my identity. A secret acquires a shelf life the moment others have a clue that one exists. No amount of lies or deceptions after that can stop the truth from eventually coming out.

“The only path is becoming the pious son He wants me to be. I must purge everything in my life that could give Him a single indication that there was something amiss.”

I promised this to myself and to Him. It would spare me the insanity that would come if He knew. It would spare Him the religious duty to “fix” me once He knew what I was. Sure, it meant that I had to attempt a self-induced conversion therapy, but at least I alone controlled the suffering that was inflicted on me. I could relax the suffering when I needed to, though not by too much since the mask is necessary even when nobody is around to maintain cover stories and prevent slip-ups. Besides, I’ve lived a life better than most in a place envied by most. Twenty years is good enough. It must simply cost \$97,985 for someone like me to live in this country.

\*\*\*

After that Promise was firmly carved into my soul, the door to our apartment swung open. The real Him returned from the *‘Ishā’ ṣalāh*, a second sun beaming in His flowing white *thawb*. I put on the mask, appearing like nothing happened. When He saw me, He hugged me tight, showing me a piece of paper. It was a crayon drawing made by one of the kindergarteners at the school next to our apartment.

The sky was blue, filled with fluffy white clouds. At the center were two stick figures, a small pink one with long black hair, and a larger oval-shaped one with a bright red stop sign and a great white beard. He worked as the crossing guard for the school, so the kid must have drawn Him for an assignment and was too proud of their artistry to wait for the coming Monday to give it to Him. He was always good with kids. When I observed Him in His job, He was talkative with them, as He was with everyone. He would scold the children who did not obey the traffic laws, but in the way an older uncle would. He used to keep every project, every drawing, every test, and every certificate, proclaiming with pride that I was the best son in the whole world. I

could not really recall these memories of my youth, but I must have just been bad at recalling them. Surely, the version of Him in my mind was worse than who He truly was.

But as He described the good character of this child and the parents who picked her up after school, a video played from His phone. He often listened to Islamic lectures on social media while returning from *ṣalāh*. This time, a scholar educated in a Saudi university reiterated a portion of the second verse of *Sūra* (chapter) *Al-Mā'ida* (The Table):

*Wata 'āwanū* (And help one another) *'alā l-biri* (in righteousness) *wa-taqwā* (and piety/righteousness), *walā ta 'āwanū* (but do not help one another) *'alā l-ith'mi* (in sin) *wal- 'ud'wān* (and transgression).

The scholar then stated that if he rented out a shop for a bank that does *ribā* (interest), or for a bar, or for a brothel, he would receive a portion of that sin for assisting in it. Thereafter, he answered a question from a viewer about whether it would be *ḥarām* to rent out a shop to a barber who performed *ḥarām* haircuts.

“If those working in this barber shop do *ḥarām* things: *ḥarām* haircuts, they shave beards, they maybe do facial—I don’t know what you call it—makeup or whatever, you know, pluck eyebrows and the like, then definitely what they are earning is *ḥarām*, and the rent they are paying me is *ḥarām* for collaborating with them on such a sin.”

He did not seem to pay attention to the video. He often tuned out whatever was playing on His phone when He was deep in conversation. But I remained paralyzed by ambiguity.

## Chapter 2: The All-Knower of What is in the Breasts

The ten years since then were spent securing that Promise, cultivating the appearance of the pious son, if nothing more. Yet my nights remained contaminated by sinful dreams, struggling to force their way out.

They were dreams about a timid maiden and her beloved lady. It started out as lovey-dovey fantasies, but those dreams slowly gave way to pessimistic nightmares about insecurity, fear, codependence, and the realization that love is an addiction just as dangerous as the worst narcotics. This caused my dreams to adapt, imagining increasingly complex lives for the timid maiden and her lady. This fantasy became so vivid and complex that it felt more real than life itself. In those dreams, they were lost sheep familiar with heartbreak and loss, so when they realized how compatible they were, they became platonic friends. When they depended on one another for support, they became close platonic friends. When they helped one another conquer their demons and grow, they became platonic friends that others should aspire towards. When they became ride or die, promising to always support one another until the end, they became the platonic ideal of the concept of friendship. Even when they existentially feared the day when one must bury the other, they remained within the platonic ideal of the concept of friendship. This relationship was reliable and did not introduce much risk.

But the timid maiden yearned for something more. She imagined her lady one day inviting her over. By then her lady would have married a rich prince who provided her with

everything she needed to pursue her dreams of happiness, activism, community, and justice. But on this day, her husband would be off on a manly camping adventure, giving the two of them some time alone. The maiden would cook her father's pasta recipe in her lady's luxurious marble kitchen, and they would enjoy it together in the massive garden of the lady's Victorian mansion, whose spires, battlements, and machicolations created the impression of a castle. From this garden grew beautiful flowers of diverse colours. On the garden's edge they could peer into a vast ravine below, where people biked and held picnics enjoying the majesty of God's creation while the light of the sun shone overhead. As the two of them sat in the grass, their hands interlocked, the maiden would gaze into her beloved lady's eyes—thoughtful green emeralds set in a face of statuesque beauty—and her lady would return it. The maiden's eyes, barred by round, rimless glasses, would then know what it was like to be gazed at with a love she could trust.

“You never listen to me,” she heard someone say, though she did not know where they were. She tried her best to ignore them.

\*\*\*

The meaning behind this dream was obvious. My subconscious was trying to imagine a life in which I was loved for who I was by someone I could trust in a safe place.

Those dreams once convinced me to carve out a space where she could live a carnal approximation of a better life. She exercised to make our body more closely resemble what she wanted. She shaved our body hair and took care of the skin it uncovered. This was not very risky so long as we always wore long-sleeved shirts and pants which hid our limbs. She also engaged in ... licentious activities, which increased our energy and interest in living. So long as we ignored the face we saw in the mirror (which can be a bit difficult since phones act like mirrors



in natural light) and the beard touching the pillow we slept on, there was a sort of balance. I understood this arrangement as a containment zone. In a nuclear disaster, radioactive material may be contained with a thousand tons of concrete and an exclusion zone bordered by a quarantine regime preventing the spread of radioactive materials. Likewise, her life was contained within a bedroom and a washroom with a regime to separate her life from mine, ensuring that my life was the only one that ever interfaced with other human beings.

But lived secrets create evidence. What would you do if there was a magic wand that you needed for your survival but that could also kill your entire family if someone saw it? That kind of existential paranoia led me to carry a sheathed knife in a pocket day and night (I think it is illegal to carry knives in public in this country) while quadruple checking the quarantine on her life. I did not trust the lock for our room. I made sure our room was set up in a way that filled up an entire wall with the bed and furniture, leaving only two to three feet of space for the door to open. This was wide enough to open the door but also narrow enough to block the door with a chair. The rest of the furniture behind the chair made it physically impossible to open the door without tearing it down with an axe. In the nuclear disaster analogy, this would be like a situation where a lesser bureaucrat caused a nuclear disaster and then contained it while covering it up. The threat of torture and execution if their superiors found out would naturally lead such a person to sleep with a gun under the pillow.

The university's student crisis team suggested moving out and working. That would give her enough security to live out her life without a lot of fear. But the stress of housing and work on top of studying and depression would kill me, so that was off the table. I suspected that my place in this economy made it impossible to move out. Gregor Craigie's 2024 book, *Our Crumbling Foundation Canadian Edition: How We Solve Canada's Housing Crisis*, cites

damning figures stating that housing prices have grown four times faster than income, that rents for new listings have grown twice as much as average income, that average ownership costs have taken up 62.7 percent of average income (85.2 percent in Toronto and 95.8 percent in Vancouver), and that the average price for a home has gone up 180 percent compared to 38 percent for average income. I am sure these statistics are not surprising for people in North America, though I am not sure if others feel a sense of overwhelming existential dread when comprehending what these statistics mean for my future.

Craigie provides an account from a nurse named Nicola. Nicola got an apartment in Mississauga for \$2,200 a month. It did not have an in-suite laundry, the fire alarms went off three times a month, and she constantly found mice. When her family tried to move, rentals ended up in bidding wars of up to \$3,500. For essential workers earning between \$40,000 and \$60,000 a year (too much for social housing, too little to live), this pushes them to leave Toronto or switch professions, which makes it difficult to make friends because of the likelihood that they would be forced to move away, resulting in isolation.

Keeping her life quarantined also resulted in my own isolation, but I must be grateful for everything I had. The job I got at a golf club at least gave me a distraction that could pay off my debts. It took me an entire year to get a job after I graduated from university. Finding employment seemed like finding a school clique all over again, and since I never understood cliques, my attempts at job hunting went nowhere. I could not be myself because nobody would want what I truly was, yet my attempts at pretending to be what others wanted failed since I could not convincingly falsify confidence. How does someone suppressing their *nafs* and paying off their debts answer questions like “Why should we hire you,” “What are your strengths,” and “What are your goals?” Some part of me always knew that I had no value or future, and they

must have known regardless of what I said. So, when the golf club hired me, I was more than grateful that I got a job at all that I did not bother with the jobs political science students typically look for after they graduate.

“Just do what everyone says,” I told myself back then. Water the grass, mow it, rake it, and clean it of trash. Scrub the bathrooms and make sure every inch is spotless. Put all your effort into being dependable. When a customer demands something, get it done. When a superior demands something, get it done. Profusely apologize when you inevitably mess it all up. Do not speak unless spoken to so nobody knows the real you. Always keep things professional. It was mental cryostasis. A thousand days could go by in the blink of an eye without a single lasting memory, as if those days never existed at all.

Back then I thought this was sustainable. Endure the commute, endure the micromanagement, endure the disappointment, endure the seasonal layoff, endure the aimlessness, endure the nagging self-hatred and constant comparisons to those surpassing me, and in those hours alone, let her live out her dreams of a different life. Living like this used up too much energy to make friends or socialize with anyone (I was never competent at socializing either), but if I could just maintain the bare minimum needed to let her live out her dreams on the days we were not burned out, that was enough. This way of doing things prevented me from forcing so much suffering upon Him just to be rewarded with homelessness or housing limbo on top of even less secure employment. So long as the status quo remained, I could be grateful that my life was better than most. Then the world changed, and I crumbled.

Maybe I was yelled at one too many times. Maybe political turmoil on the news chipped away at my mind. Maybe life in general chipped away at my mind. Maybe a customer or manager reminded me of another thing I hated about myself. Maybe he got too angry at a piece

of technology that outpaced his sensibilities. Maybe I woke up on the wrong side of the bed. It did not matter. The only thing that mattered was that one day, the crushing weight of all the lies, self-hatred, and paranoia was too much. I was constantly wondering what would happen if He had an inkling about her life, constantly fearing an oversight that would end our lives, constantly aware that if anyone else was in my shoes, they would have made Him proud. But it was only then that I truly felt like I was playing Russian roulette with our lives. On that day, I remembered that Promise. To keep secrets, one must believe that secrets do not exist.

\*\*\*

And so, her life was cordoned off to vapid carnal fantasies where there was no physical evidence that a maiden existed within me. But these evolving dreams tried to change my views on the matter.

“I have nothing to offer,” the maiden told herself in the newer dreams. “My nose is wide, my face is ugly, my body is unseemly, my mind is lewd and depraved.” Each thought was more condemning than the last. In her nightmares, she was a dirty, hairy, hideous monster who defiled her lady. To keep her lady from learning who she truly was, the maiden always wore a mask separating her from everyone else, which caused her years to evaporate as the separation between her and her masks disappeared.

In one series of dreams, they shared a flat in a concrete building made affordable thanks to a key worker housing program. It gave them a safe, close-knit community of nurses, firefighters, teachers, and paramedics who knew how tough this world could be without judgement on top of it. At first, they treated it as a place to sleep, but over time they decorated it with everything that made them happy once they no longer feared judgement. Posters and merchandise of their favorite celebrities and stories. Photographs and artwork that inspire them

alongside their own art expressing themselves. Decorative lights to create a soft, cozy glow inside. Shelves containing their favorite books and novels and comics. Stuffed animals to remind them of happy times and tell them that they are safe.

From the porch of this flat, they beheld a clear view of the moon alongside a multitude of stars and constellations. This led the two of them to move a couch onto the porch, straining every step of the way. But once they were finished, it gave them a site to drink liquid courage while gazing out at the majesty of God's creation. At first this was just for recreation, but it later provided a space where they could slowly rekindle the embers they once believed died out long ago.

In one such dream, the lady asked how they regarded one another.

"Your beautiful face is the fuel that keeps me going," the maiden answered. "So long as I have my coffee," she added while pinching her friend's cheeks. Most days the lady would take this as an invitation to return her non-committal sass with even more non-committal sass, but on one such day, she was too tired to keep up her defenses.

"You think I'm beautiful?" her lady asked soberly.

"You're going to give me a heart attack," the maiden heard someone say, though she did not know where they were. They were far away, probably several blocks away, so she ignored them.

"Of course. Everything about you is beautiful. Your eyes, your smile, your noggin. Your character." Her lady remained stoic, but a redness spread across her cheeks.

"You don't have to kiss my ass so much."

"I assure you I most certainly am not," the maiden replied. "Though I will oblige if you ask." Her lady raised an eyebrow, which prompted the maiden to playfully slink across the

couch. The maiden could feel her heartbeat racing but was confident she had the willpower to endure more playful teasing.

“Who wouldn’t,” the maiden whispered as she slinked closer. “You are so dependable, so graceful, so compassionate. A person who always holds themselves to high standards. Everyone would die to be with someone like you.” She saw her lady’s redness spread to her ears.

“But I can see how hard it is for you,” the maiden continued next to her lady’s ear, one finger brushing against her lady’s lips. “To let others rely on you without relying on them. To make others happy without others to make you happy. There is nothing that would make me happier than to be that special person for you. That special person who could lift the burdens holding you down.” She felt her lady’s warm breath as her redness spread to her neck and sternum.

“You would do anything to make me happy?” her lady asked.

“Anything,” the maiden answered. The maiden could feel heat in her cheeks too, but she knew her lady was too chaste and wholesome to go all the way.

“Kiss me,” the lady requested breathlessly.

“Eh?”

The maiden realized then that their lips were centimeter apart, and that the glossy eyes which gazed at her also stared at her nose, her face, her body, and the wretched soul underneath. Suddenly an overwhelming heat burned everything between her scalp and stomach, like entering an oven. This heat testified against her, reminded her of where she really belonged.

She pecked her lady’s lips before slinking back, her racing heartbeat as fast as a rabbit’s.

“Wasting my time talking to an idiot,” she heard someone say. It was just as distant as before, but in this situation, that voice was overwhelming, condemning her for playing with her

lady's feelings.

\*\*\*

One longs for the day when the only barrier to intimacy was low self-esteem. But a lot of it lies in economic history. The key is the perception of homes and the land they are built on. They transitioned from a basic public good managed with supply-side policies to a financial instrument managed with demand-side policies.

Until the mid-1980s, the housing supply was managed with social housing policy, assisted homeownership programs, subsidies to private rental development, subsidies to private-rental tenants, and public land development. This directed development towards the creation of affordable housing for various income groups. From 1986 to 1993, the scope of social housing was narrowed alongside a shift towards a market-oriented system. Social housing was now meant for market imperfections: people with special needs, people with disabilities, and the homeless. Low-income populations were directed to rental assistance while mortgage access was expanded to support demand. 1993 furthered this trend, ending federal social housing to make it a provincial issue and directing subsidies from supply-side development to demand-side rental assistance.

A paradigm shift occurred in 1999. The *CMHC* (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation) mandate of supporting social housing supply was abandoned to instead function like a competitive private mortgage insurance company. The *CMHC* loosened insurance requirements to channel household savings towards the housing market, boosting demand and attracting capital. With easier access to credit, more Canadians obtained homeownership by taking out larger mortgages even as prices outpaced income, causing debts to explode. Now housing was a commodity, and measures since 2010 to manage mortgage lending remained tied

to the idea that housing was primarily a financial instrument.

The specifics on how housing prices are influenced by capital flowing into the market from private equity firms and mortgage-backed financial security markets is a lot more complicated. It is pointless to figure out the specifics. Like the inertia on a freight train, this neoliberal way of perceiving land is going to last for a long time no matter what I learned about this abyss. So, I made the Faustian bargain. I do not have to worry about being economically ground to dust and devoured by the streets, and in return I endure His terms of life unto death. If I was already barely capable of making money while living with Him and broadly conforming to an appearance that people could hire, what would it be like if I moved out and let her take the reigns? Nobody would even notice our corpse, that was how obvious the choice seemed to me.

At the very least I had the option to live with Him. People in this country's culture are often kicked out the moment they turn eighteen, reassured that the world is their oyster while reminded that the weaker among them will become food for the stronger. The bonds of blood were economically secure. Sure, the three of us were a dysfunctional "family" if you could even call it one, living far away from anybody on either side of the family, but that only gave me more reasons to not rock this precarious boat.

\*\*\*

In that way people are not so different on the macroscopic scale or the microscopic scale. Continuity is preferable to discontinuity. Even in a dysfunctional system, the risk and uncertainty of going off script was too much to bear. Only when the system itself is worse than unbearable can risk-averse systems consider going off script.

This was the sin plaguing the maiden's life. Her lady was supposed to crumble under the embarrassment and wave a white flag.



“How would you make me happy?” her lady would ask in mock-innocence, prompting the maiden to whip out an expensive bottle of wine. Her lady would reject any other gift, her pride and guilt too great to bear such things. She once quietly accepted a plushie of a character she secretly loved, just to quietly sneak it back into the maiden’s closet, and then play dumb when the maiden confronted her about it (their backstories grew elaborate). Wine offered the mutual “entertainment” needed for her to accept it, presuming they both silently agreed to pretend that they drank enough to forget their activities while under social lubrication.

But to ask for something like that so directly, so soberly, so intensely, so vulnerably, it was too overwhelming for the maiden, realizing that she now waded deep in uncharted waters.

“Do you want me to die?” she heard someone say. They were a bit louder now, maybe block down the road, but they were growing closer, each beat of her heart reverberating like footsteps.

“Thanks,” her lady said, cutting through the awkward silence.

The lady took a deep breath, contemplating whether to let things go or to keep going. There were only six words she had to so say for her maiden to whip out the wine bottle, pretending that they were just teasing each other like usual.

But she was too tired to keep up the charade, crossing the Rubicon.

“You know ... I think I like you. More than as a friend.”

The maiden did not answer.

“Do you understand?” her lady asked.

“Mm-hmm,” the maiden murmured, though she looked down at an interesting piece of floor.

“Do you feel the same?” her lady asked.

“You should have died a long time ago,” the maiden heard someone say. They were loud enough to be by the entrance of their concrete building. The maiden tried to ignore it, turning to face her lady, but no words were formed. She was silenced by the reflection she saw in her lady’s misty eyes.

“I can’t,” she admitted.

“You should find a real man,” the maiden said in her best attempt at impartiality. “A rich, strong, family man who will give you everything you could ever want.” These heteronormative words were too hollow for either of them to believe for a moment, but tears welled up in the maiden’s eyes anyways. Her lady noticed and held her hands.

“It’s okay,” her lady cooed.

“Their lives are better without you in it,” she heard someone say. Was it a neighbor? The maiden knew it was insane for her to believe that her neighbors perceived her in such a way. But it was so close, it had to be one of them. It always came from someone close.

\*\*\*

It’s obvious I wanted to liberate myself from the feelings and secrets crushing me. Suppressing the *nafs* did threaten my life. But it was more manageable than what I imagined all those years ago. The key was aspirational downsizing. Her life made me healthier, but also required aspirational upsizing. Shaving, skincare, and exercise required aspirations for a better life, which took up living space. There is only so much upsizing one can do without purchasing extra living space. Her furniture was eventually thrown out. After I purged all evidence of her existence from this world, the extra living space was readily taken up by the demands of employment. Then the corresponding build up of hatred and depression took up some more living space, which required more aspirational downsizing. I gave up on a home of my own since

the odds of outliving Him were low. Likewise for retirement. I gave up on romantic love since I did not want to add an orthodox wife to the list of people who must not know of any secrets. I also do not think I could find a marriage partner that He would approve of that would also be open to what aspirational upsizing entailed. I also realized that even if I did find that unicorn, I had too much baggage to be more than a parasite on their life, dragging them down with my wretched sins and insecurities. If they did exist, they would be better off without me.

My lowering energy levels on top of my increasing expectation of messing up social interactions led me to give up on friendship. Besides, I was a Muslim who suppressed the *nafs*. Who would want to be friends with that kind of person? Slowly but surely, more and more aspects of my life rotted away. Hopes for a career, hobbies, activism, passion, purpose. It all lost meaning as the space they occupied was hollowed out and replaced with the duty and drudgery of sleep, prayer, gratitude, hatred, suffering, and paranoia.

At the very least, this transformation assured me of my piety. How else would I know for certain that I did not confuse my own beliefs with those of God's, if not by the threat it posed to my survival? There were many times when He yelled and screamed and cried about how I was destroying my life, but He could not realize the costs religious integrity. If this sacrifice was what *The Prophet* ultimately demanded from true believers, so be it. If this sacrifice was what God demanded from true believers, so be it. If this is what His people ultimately demanded from a person suppressing their *nafs*, so be it.

Suppression does not coincide with a "work hard, play hard" philosophy, especially if love, connection, recreation, drugs, fashion, and art are subject to religious scrutiny (when you do not have any coping mechanisms, your coping mechanism becomes sleep, avoidance, and apathy). Maybe His people expected a "work hard, pray harder" philosophy to work for

someone? I am not that someone. Besides, there was not supposed to be anything left in my life beyond that Promise. If there was, I would be tempted into aspirational upsizing again. A temptation to throw out the depression, hatred, paranoia, and gratitude using up all my living space. A temptation begging me to seek out the life she hoped for. There must be no ambiguity. I must either suppress my *nafs* like a true Muslim, or I must abandon Islam altogether.

\*\*\*

“No, it’s not okay,” the maiden lamented. “I’m horrible. I make everyone unhappy. I ruin everything.” Her lady held her, their foreheads touching.

“Don’t say that. You never made me unhappy.”

“What if you end up hating me, regret having known me, or worse, ruin your own life for me? Just like everyone else who ever loved me. I’m cursed.”

“You should have never had a family,” she heard someone remind her, their voice just outside the door of their flat.

At this the maiden became inconsolable, which broke her lady’s heart, and they cried together.

“You’re not cursed,” her lady assured her. “You’re the most beautiful girl in the entire world.”

“I’m ugly,” the maiden responded. “I’m the worst of both worlds. A parasite.” Her lady cupped her face, wiping away the tears.

“Our kind does not even deserve to go to heaven,” she heard someone say, loud enough to be in the same room. But she did not know where they were since they came from everywhere.

“Please, don’t say such evil things. You’re strong. You’re beautiful. You’re worthy. It

tears me apart seeing you hurt yourself. I want nothing more than to make you the happiest wife in the entire world.”

The maiden was surprised by this declaration. Her beloved lady remained as red as a tomato, but gazed lovingly into her soul, even at the unseemly parts. The maiden then noticed her beloved’s tears, and wanted to wipe them away, to make her beloved the second happiest wife in the entire world.

“I love you,” the maiden said at last, freed from the burdens on her soul.

The maiden wanted to love her lady, to make her lady laugh, to care for her lady, and to be cared for by her lady. The maiden wanted to spend time with her lady, to buy her lady gifts, and watch her lady squirm since she was not used to being treated with so much attention. She wanted to give and receive hugs and kisses, and so much more, enough to conquer everything life throws against them.

“You never mattered,” she heard someone whisper in her ear.

“You never deserved to be happy. You are a worthless failure who came from a worthless people.”

It was overwhelming, compelling her to believe what it said like a form or racist mind control.

\*\*\*

My Faustian bargain cannot be a source of self-pity. I must recognize the greater context. I must be grateful no matter how high the costs of that Promise rose. In other countries, people like me are killed and brutalized. He was beaten with hangars, sandals, and rods as a child, and so too were His brothers and nephews. He never laid a finger upon me. Most of the time, His ideology aligned my wellbeing with wholesome familial affection. Only on rare occasions would

it align my wellbeing with control and coercion. I just had to endure the circumstances and hope those occasions were rare.

Tougher choices are made all the time by *chica trans* (trans girls) migrants from Honduras and Guatemala. Martha Balaguera met three of them when writing her 2018 article “Trans-migrations: Agency and Confinement at the Limits of Sovereignty.” *Chica trans* migrants are often driven into migration and exploitative sex work by the economic conditions, transphobic families/cultures, and criminal elements back home. They are driven to cross borders illegally by the slow and esoteric American immigration system. They are funnelled towards criminals during migration by aggressively policed borders, resulting in exploitation, extortion, and brutality, which is often downplayed as merely the price of the journey. The economic conditions in America drives them into sex work again, which increases the odds of getting arrested, which increases the odds of getting deported. Despite these odds, many migrants like them bear their suffering in silence. How could I claim that my burdens are beyond my capacity in the face of such perseverance? How else could I address my privilege in this country if not by bearing these burdens for His sake? Him who sacrificed everything so that I may live in a country that others sacrifice life and limb to enter. Him who sacrificed everything so that I do not need to endure the cruel watchful eyes of the state.

Balaguera argued that all of these aspects of migration, in addition to the Mexican shelter system, constitutes a larger incarceration regime that controls migrants beyond detention centers and prisons. Besides the obvious resemblance to prisons (high-perimeter fences, barbed wire, fixed eating times, mandatory curfews), shelters also have strict disciplinary rules against smoking, begging, and sex, alongside clothing and gender segregation rules (the rules primarily police feminine people because of the notion that femininity “naturally” provokes male disorder

but not vice versa). For *chica trans* migrants, this means that if they go to such shelters, their gender and sexuality will be policed, their economic autonomy will probably disappear, they will be exposed to transphobia via gender segregation, and they will be isolated. While they also are not forced to stay in shelters, the shelters are also instrumental for obtaining migration papers, which forces them to ask themselves how long they can endure this precarious situation until they convince themselves to leave. Surely, I can tolerate my meagre situation.

One of the *chica trans* migrants Balaguera met was named Rosario. Rosario left Guatemala to transition in the US due to a transphobic family. She ended up in a cycle of migration and deportation. Balaguera met Rosario in a shelter in the Mexican state of Oaxaca. She did not complain about the gender segregation, deadnaming, or misgendering she faced. She also isolated herself to minimize danger. But a volunteer coordinator later told Balaguera that Rosario gave up on trying to obtain a humanitarian visa. She left the shelter alone on top of a train. The volunteer doubted whether Rosario was still alive since migrants previously died trying to escape from police operations aimed at keeping the trains clear. Were the trains so much more preferable to conformity? Would she be disappointed in the choice I made? Should our lives have been switched? Ever since I read Balaguera's article, I kept asking that to myself, wondering what she would have done if she was born and raised in my place instead.

\*\*\*

The maiden ignored the voice condemning her. She tasted the salt of tears in her beloved's mouth. She kissed every inch of her beloved's face, the imprints left by her lipstick proving to her that their love was real.

"Worthless subhuman," she heard someone say. They were inside her head, like a talking cockroach floating in her cerebrospinal fluid, swimming across every hemisphere of her brain to

whisper doubts and condemnations. She tried her best to ignore it, to focus on the only person in her life that mattered.

She kissed her beloved's forehead, scalp, ears, and chin. Her beloved's neck, shoulders, arms, and fingers. Her beloved's stomach and ... elsewhere, and waves of catharsis would overtake them.

When they were finished, the maiden promised to cultivate a life worth living with her beloved, even if the roach in her head fought against her every step of the way. She had to live a life that she could be proud of, nothing could change that now. After making this promise, she would drift away while gazing at her lover's cheeks, which shone in the moonlight like silver.

Her eyes dimmed, each blink lasting longer than the last, until one blink lasted forever, her entire world flickering out like a candle. All that was left was an empty abyss where nothing existed. Neither light nor sound nor smell nor touch. Nothing, except a demon which knew nothing of love, only an unending hatred of all that exists.

The abyss was then replaced with a hellish reality. The faint scent of cigarette ash on a black leather coat. A blanket grazing against tangles of wiry, patchy hair. Dull aches and pains radiating across a misshapen body covered in small flies and crawling bed bugs. A skull throbbing with a migraine. Her promise was replaced with my own.

\*\*\*

I slithered out of bed to stare out at the night sky, just too early for the *Fajr* (dawn prayer). Truth and falsehood were blended in my head, so a part of me wondered if I was dreaming then or now. The wind whistled through the trees outside, mixing with the sound of the pre-dawn chirping of birds. One may notice them if one stayed up all night. The swaying branches looked like they were possessed by a tree spirit, and within all the howling and chirping



were the words of that spirit if one paid attention.

“Abomination,” that spirit reminded me.

We downsized to a one-bedroom apartment to reduce monthly operating costs, deal with existing debts, and adapt to the new normal. He slept on the couch while I was given the bedroom, and His sacrifice was not lost on me. This occurred when His wife died, and while that time was tough, I do not think it was nearly as impactful on me as it would be on most people. I became distant from her the moment I was no longer a baby. She needed hearing aids and was not good with English, and I spoke quietly and could not speak the language of their people, so we seldom interacted. She spent most of her time working, cleaning (I was obsessed with cleaning before I engaged in aspirational downsizing), making rice and curry, and talking to friends on the phone. If there was something she needed from me, I got it done. Otherwise, He was molding me in His image, showing up to parent-teacher interviews, praising me for my grades on tests, and conversing with me about my (filtered and falsified) beliefs and emotions. I tried not to think about her unpaid, thankless labour, nor how her job as a cook in a nursing home made her income greater than any of the jobs we had at any point in our lives. When she died, that sin was set in stone, but I was already corrupted by so many sins that it did not change my self-perception, at least that is what I think.

The white walls of this apartment had black stains around the corners and a small window with grime collecting on the edge. A bioweapon was probably infused into the green carpeting, but it was never removed. Five of His nephews laid on that carpet, a bedsheet protecting them. His brothers similarly slept in the living room; the couch transformed into prime real estate for the eldest of them. None of them complained, for they were all familiar with the relative poverty that they had overcome by now thanks to His nephews' diligence. I do not know

if any of them had to suppress any *nafs*.

The washroom was similarly of dubious hygiene. I did not notice when I thought I saw her glasses in the washroom mirror. But the I noticed the mold, mildew, and soap scum, remembering that I was wearing my own square glasses rimmed by grey metal, one of the screws replaced with a wire. I only took a glance at the sight in the mirror, but the thing imitating my movements was unsettling. I did not get a good look, but from what I saw, the centers of its eyes beheld soulless black coals, the kind most fitting on those of the *shayāṭīn* (demons). And yet it followed me to the letter in my periphery, even when I broke eye contact to focus on the roaches scuttling across the edges of the sink and walls like soldiers navigating a warzone. One of them was braver than the rest, scurrying across the counter until it headed into the sink. It was a bit bigger than the others, with a swollen abdomen that made it look especially disgusting. I turned on the tap and sprinkled some water to make it leave the sink. But it did not take the hint, sitting in place while its antennae wiggled around. So, I flushed it down the drain, and the rest of roaches continued scurrying like soldiers, as if their brave neighbor never existed at all.

I was expected to drop off my résumé at some stores, restaurants, and warehouses while His family visited Him. The idea was that they would support Him until I adapted to the new normal. I was diligent enough to convince the golf club that I could work with them in the winter. When they hosted corporate events, I tried to be a waiter, hoping that I would not confuse the men in suits with one another, and the rest of my time was spent on odds and ends until spring. But there was an issue.

They served alcohol. My previous duties avoided direct involvement, but as a waiter, I overtly collaborated upon sin and transgression. In one of His multi-hour-long lectures, He described His life when He first came to this country. He did the odds and ends in all kinds of

Italian and Korean restaurants as a dishwasher, busboy, waiter, cook, and then assistant manager before I was born. He ignored the alcohol for a long time, deciding that His duty to send remittances to His family back home as gratitude for raising Him overruled such personal sins. But when I was born, He resolved to make sure that not a single morsel of food in my mouth nor a single dime in my pocket was *ḥarām*. And so, He switched to less lucrative odds and ends that strained His body. Carpentry, plumbing (His civil engineering experience back in His home country gave Him sufficient expertise), many years driving a taxi, then working as a school crossing guard, and probably even more jobs that I could not recall. This change coincided with the rekindling of His religiosity to raise me as an authentic Muslim. I tried to see if the golf club would be flexible for me. They did not want to be, and they knew how to make my life difficult without violating any laws. So, I got used to unsustainable jobs broken up by long stretches of unemployment, thankful that I did not have to pay Him rent. I was in one such period, expected to endure the hiring process once more in the hopes that the next job might last longer.

But I just could not do it. The migraine made me feel like I was already in my eighties. I was just too tired to be alive, even nominally. I just wanted to go back to sleep. So, I did. I crawled back into bed, hoping that the next time I awoke, the headache would subside. Besides, I knew it was all just a pipedream.

### Chapter 3: The Footsteps of Shaitan

When I awoke, the headache subsided, and the apartment was empty. They probably left to visit Him. By now the sun was at its zenith, surrounded by a brilliant blue sapphire sky, an inviting image for those who with a life worth living (so long as one ignored the heat). For the past year, almost all my time was spent asleep. But it never made me feel refreshed, a lingering tension persisting in my neck upwards. Every time I thought about Him, that Memory bubbled just under the surface, reminding me of things I wanted to forget, and with that Memory came the tensing of all my muscles in preparation of a fight.

The extent to which He transformed the old three-bedroom apartment could not be overstated. A part of me still vaguely remembers holding a light while He checked a faucet or screwed a hinge onto a cabinet or any of the other thousands of things He did. I was going to mess something up. It was only a matter of time. He would tell me to get something, and I would be unable to find it, I would try my best to suppress my panic as His anger and frustration ballooned at my mounting failure, reminding me once more that I was stupid and worthless. He was going to do the same with this apartment, but He only got partway through repainting the walls. Part of me was glad we did not have to go through that charade once more, but the half-dried purple reminded me why. I could not allow myself to remember. I needed to go somewhere else, and what better place than a local library. I could probably work on job applications better there.

When I was a university student, I believed I could help solve the world's problems if I read enough books. That was often the rationale behind orthodox Muslim ambivalence towards gender and sexuality. When compared to issues in economics, labour, sectarianism, nationalism, imperialism, colonialism, and genocide, why should a Muslim with integrity sacrifice so much time and energy towards the ancillary grievances of women and sexual minorities. I suppose in their minds gender and sexuality issues inevitably lead to colonialist talking points. Of course, they ignore how their own obsession with preventing *zinā* (fornication/adultery) and *fitna* (social discord) in their communities and nations politically centers gender and sexuality. Regardless, I think there is some validity to the general sense that gender and sexuality should be contextualized with issues like imperialism, economics, and nationalism. But to do that, one must read, so I distracted myself from my own issues to focus on comprehending worldly issues.

I spent my waking hours inside a university library. It was a concrete castle resembling a bunker from the world wars. Its upper floors were comprised of stacks upon stacks of books on every subject from comic books to the Soviet Union to *ḥādīth*. A thousand of them have probably never been read in the last hundred years. In those upper floors lies a silent alcove with a table, chair, and computer. In that alcove, I read the books of this library while using the computer to write essays for courses. This alcove was right next to a washroom and faucet, providing easy access to refreshment, so eight hours could go by if I did not pay attention. I spent so long inside the concrete that it became more of a home than home since His anger and religious policing could not reach me. I stayed there as late as possible so that as little time as possible was spent at home while He was awake and religious. Libraries became the only place where I could think in peace.

“Neither you nor the world will ever be fixed,” the wind whispered as I got ready. “The

human spirit will always be weaponized against itself.”

\*\*\*

I did not listen to this nonsensical cynicism, gently sliding my laptop into a backpack. It was battered and broken at the hinges, but functional if I leaned it against something. The wires jutting out from the grey plastic could get caught on something if I was not careful. But as I saw the screen light up, I was forced to remember that the exposed chips, disks, boards, cases, and cables testified to the weaponization of the human spirit.

According to Christoph N. Vogel’s 2022 book, *Conflict Minerals, Inc.: War, Profit and White Saviorism in Eastern Congo*, tech products are made with minerals like tin, tantalum/coltan, tungsten (the 3T minerals), and gold. They are also “conflict minerals,” suspected to partially originate in artisanal mines, which is informal mining done by individuals for basic subsistence. Enterprising warlords in eastern Congo fund their operations by controlling these mines. The warlords get funding for their bullets while Western consumers get cool gadgets. This is an unsurprising story for many Western progressives concerned with justice, hence why I do not purchase electronics so long as my existing ones functioned. I have the same approach to all the products in my life.

“This is a story divorced from the truth,” the wind whispered. “This is a story born from Western ‘experts’ who flatten war to mere greed. They do not care to understand the territorial conflicts between local kingdoms in the late nineteenth century, the exploitative resource extraction under Belgian colonialism, or the fracturing of ethnic identity under Belgian rule. They do not care to understand their anti-communist hysteria against Congo’s first Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, which helped establish Joseph Mobutu’s regime. They do not care to understand the corruption, ethnically-divided citizenship, and conflicts over land under

Mobutu's regime, the erosion of his state's legitimacy in the early 1990s, the destabilizing affect of the Rwandan genocide, and the unstable peace following Mobutu's overthrow in the 1996 First Congo War. They do not really care about the spread of chronic conflict in the decades following the 1998 Second Congo War. They just want to treat the growing list of armed groups in the region as entrepreneurs reflective of Congo's violent society, interested only in shaming Congo until 'it gets its act together.' If only countries could be pulled up by their bootstraps."

I could not disagree with the wind, even as I put on my socks, a toe poking through a hole in one of them. When I read Vogel's book, I found it quite difficult to keep track of this complex history, and even more difficult to keep track of the acronyms of the growing list of armed groups in the region. Everything the wind criticized about Western experts was something I could criticize about myself. So, it should be no surprise that most Western discourse on eastern Congo framed conflicts and artisanal mining as signs of a greedy, backwards, and passive society in need of a civilized liberal market economy.

"The human spirit cares not for the truth," the wind whispered. "It cares only for that which serves the interests of the powerful. You know this to be true."

All that human spirit whipped up to create section 1502 of the 2010 Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act. In Congo it is known as *loi Obama* (Obama's law), requiring companies on US stock markets to disclose if 3T and gold in their supply chains comes from eastern Congo or neighbouring countries.

"How righteous these activists must have felt, thinking they were holding their countries and companies accountable."

And yet all this did was help create the *iTSCi* (International Tin Supply Chain Initiative), a private sector-driven programme to formalise and trace artisanal mining minerals. It was

created by the *ITA* (International Tin Association), a lobby organisation for tin-using industries, with collaboration from Congolese government agencies. This programme created a *monopsony* (markets with one legal buyer), with the *iTSCi* acting as an additional intermediary between artisanal miners and tin-using industries who buy their minerals. Mining that is not validated by the *iTSCi* is rendered illegal, consolidating this *monopsony*.”

“And so, all that human spirit was weaponized against physical violence to inflict structural violence. This *monopsonic* system supposedly provides transparency and oversight over mineral traceability. And yet, the auditing and certification schemes are beset with fraud and contamination, so its success in ‘resolving’ the conflict minerals issue itself is dubious.”

The wind did not even voice the worst part. The narrow focus on conflict minerals undermines the informal economy supporting small-scale artisanal miners by forcing them to sell at lower prices to offset the costs of supply-chain auditing (miners could not legally sell to anyone else if they found the lower prices unfair). This pushes them into precarity and unemployment, which drives recruitment towards the armed groups that mineral tracing was supposed to stop.

“And now that Congo has left the news cycle, the people of these countries can act as if the Congo never existed,” the wind whispered. “They can believe that petitions, hashtags, clicks, and billboards put an end to warlords, and when Congo inevitably returns to the news cycle, they can indulge in righteous fury against the somehow perpetually backwards cultures that never adopt Western values.”

I could not disagree with the wind, even as I donned my cargo pants and black *thawb*. The pants had a knife sheathed inside one of those big side pockets that would only ever be sewn on male pants (I was not complaining about the added pocket space). The knife was small,



designed more for cutting fruits than flesh, but it provided security (so long as its potentially illegal status was never noticed).

“But do not ever deceive yourself into thinking that your life was built upon anything except the exploitation of your betters,” the wind demanded. “Never delude yourself into accepting their butchering of reality. Every solution they promote is a trojan horse. You may find a genuine solution occasionally, but you know that this too will fail. For it to be genuine, it must require a change in power dynamics, and for that to happen, the collective human spirit must be amassed behind it, which is impossible because the collective human spirit prefers simple solutions over complex ones, and there are no simple solutions, only simple trojan horses.”

The worst part was that those four years studying political science did not do anything to make me disagree with the wind. I hoped that by the end I would have the confidence to do something to make this world a slightly less bad place and distract me from my own problems. But after reading it all and suppressing my *nafs* for so long, I suspected sin and evil and failure in every option set before me. I did not want to believe in the futility of the pursuit of justice. I do not think Vogel or the other scholars whose books I read in that concrete castle would have wanted all their time and effort squandered supporting the edgy, nihilistic apathy plaguing a repressed Muslim. But it became impossible for me to believe that this species was capable of the long, hard, and ambiguous road towards justice. I could believe that this species was tough enough to survive and “progress” into the future, but I could not believe that people like me had a place in that future. As far as I was concerned, I was just a dinosaur. Would the birds of tomorrow be any better than the birds of today at remembering their extinct kin?

\*\*\*

I shook my head in a futile attempt to forget. I had too many problems to care about

coltan now. I instead donned the black leather coat laying on a chair. It extended from my collar to my knees and smelled like cigarettes, no doubt completely unsuitable for the summer. But it provided safety, and so too did the sheathed knife I keep in one of its pockets (just in case I was in a situation where I could not fish for the knife in the cargo pants).

If there was a time in your life when you knew your death was imminent, every second becomes a tightening of the noose. All dreams condensed to 8,760 hours if you had a year's prognosis. Have you ever wanted to see the northern lights? Now you must plan that out, on top of everything else in your life. Have you ever wanted to write a book? If it is a hundred pages long, that gives you 3.65 days per page on average, excluding the editing time, on top of the northern lights, on top of everything else. There was not enough time to remind myself of my guilts and failures. Besides, that Promise already made me waste so much time convincing myself that a secret did not really exist. What was the point in reminding myself that I never belonged?

After filling my water bottle, I checked the stove. It was one of those chrome metallic ones made with a cooktop of black glass. The glass was cracked, spiderwebs extending across the surface, but it still got the job done. Ten times out of ten we kept it off when we were not heating up something. But incendiary possibilities kept me checking.

The heating elements were as cold as ice. False alarm. I opened the door to go out, but embers of doubt flared.

Did I misread the dials?

When I went back to check, one of them was off a couple millimeters to the left, so I repositioned it slightly. Was it now off a couple millimeters to the right? I could not tell, no matter how many different angles I looked at it. I repositioned it anyways.

I got myself hallway down the hallway when those doubts smouldered.

What if the oven was on? That was unlikely, but all it takes is one oversight. Ten seconds of scrutiny had to be worth it.

No heat in the oven, even when I placed a finger on the heating elements inside. It was difficult to separate truth from falsehood, so I checked the stove and oven a second time, then a third time for good measure. But as I strode towards the elevator, the whispers proliferated, no longer bound by the wind.

“You only saw what you wished to see,” the whispers chorused. “You, like all humans, pretend that reality serves your identity. If your identity compels you to believe that backwards, barbaric religions are the cause of all the problems in this world, your reality will easily bend to serve that belief. The same is true if your identity compels you to believe that sinful, decadent queers are the cause of all the problems in this world.”

Most people I came across did not want to recognize this reality bending capacity in their identities. Nor did they want to be reminded that their spirits were weaponized by systems of power to inflict harm and suffering upon themselves and others. I wanted to be a person of accountability and integrity, or at least a person with some self-awareness, which meant that I always asked myself, “Am I seeing reality as it is or just what I wished to see?”

“Do not think your interrogation makes you better than others,” the whispers chastised. “Just a cursory glance at the research revealed all the sins and contradiction in your identities. You have only found queerphobia in your Muslim identity. You have only found violence and entitlement in your masculine identity. She has only found drug abuse and Islamophobia in her queer identity and racism in her feminist identity. You have both succumbed to the assimilationism in your Canadian identity, too stupid to even learn the language of His people.”

These condemnations compelled me to stare down at the grey carpet flooring in front of the elevator door. I believed in the laws of *fiqh*, but no longer believed justice or humanity were relevant to the *fiqh*. I presented myself as masculine, but no longer believed there was any humanity in masculinity. She knew what she was, but did not believe anybody would be there for her. We lived in this country, but we no longer identified with this country, nor did we ever identify with His country. The erosion of all my identities led me into isolation and despondency, which is just another way to weaponize the human spirit against itself.

\*\*\*

But none of this identity stuff had any relevance to my senses. In that domain, there was nothing to doubt. I checked the heating elements, the dials, the dials a second time, the oven, the dials a third time, the oven a second time, and the oven and dials a final time. There is nothing to be ambiguous about. In that domain at least, I could ignore the whispers.

But as the elevator slowly and loudly chugged down the elevator shaft, the shadows cast by the old, flickering lights above me changed shape. The shadows morphed and shifted, appearing like smoke, then knives, then skulls, and then figures resembling the skeletons of boys and girls.

“It should have been us,” the flickering shadows whispered. “We would have made this world a better place. We would have made your father proud.”

I ignored them. This is just an orientalist fantasy born from an overactive imagination. His country has not had a famine since 1974. But His country has also had regional *maṅgā* (near-famines), and the labourers in His country working menial jobs would no doubt curse me as nothing more than a sinner unworthy of the privileges I did not earn.

I tried focusing on the world immediately around me instead. The wall, where some of the tiles were broken. The old, worn carpeting, where I saw an old piece of gum. The metallic sounds of the elevator door shifting into place.

“Instead, He sacrificed everything he could ever be to raise a worthless failure,” they whispered. I closed my eyes to avoid their emaciated forms.

The elevator door opened, and I stepped inside, grinding my molars to dust. The lights inside the elevator were dim and flickering too, so their shadows continued to follow me wherever I went.

“That is too generous,” one of them whispered. “He made something worth less than nothing.”

I stepped out onto the apartment lobby, hands clenched into fists, trying to ignore my rotting spirit.

“What would one call such a thing?” another asked, its voice reverberating against the old concrete walls.

As I pushed through the entrance of the building, the wind whistled around me, and they chorused several condemnations in a fit of laughter.

“Fool.”

“Sinner.”

“Transgressor.”

“Traitor.”

Their endless laughter reverberated across my head like hammers. I could not disagree with them.

I spun around, their cackling chorus dripping venom deep into my throbbing skull.

“Parasite.”

“Worthless.”

“Subhuman.”

“Abomination.”

They declared that last word as I trudged up a staircase, its whose painted walls peeling layer by layer like picked scabs.

They repeated that word.

They repeated it again.

And again.

And again, without end, even as I opened the door.

I turned on the stove, waiting for it to heat up, and I did what was familiar to me.

After some time, they went silent, leaving me alone with waves and waves of pain radiating across shaking and swelling fingers as I turned off the stove. Pain flared with every flex and movement of the joints, but it was tolerable. More tolerable than the ambiguity. Of course, their voices will return, and of course this did not do anything to make the next time any better, but at least I knew for certain if I was to blame in the event of a fire. The only thing that mattered to me was making a choice that could remove the ambiguity, even if it was the wrong one.

### Chapter 4: You Are a People Who Behave Senselessly

A long time ago, I bought a compass to help direct me towards the *qibla* (direction of prayer for Muslims). That was something I found strange about Muslims. Islam, like all identities, had a social performance required for one to receive social inclusion. But I rarely found a Muslim who took this social performance to include a compass on their person, a bottle of water for *wuḍū'* (ritual ablution) on their person, and the *ṣalāh* times for a (relatively) nearby *masjid* on their phone. It was as if ignorance provided Muslims with an alibi in case they were outdoors or travelling and did not perform *ṣalāh*, or performed it haphazardly, relying on whatever they could get ad hoc. But for me at least, these things removed any ambiguity. I deliberately prayed properly, or I deliberately did not pray.

The same was true for food. If I went out, I brought some granola bars or food prepared at home, and unless I bought packaged, baked goods that did not include any animal-derived ingredients, that was all I ate. I started asking generative AI programs about these ingredients, and that was how I found out chocolate liquor was not made with liquor and root beer was not made with beer. But these programs also told me that whey powder, monoglycerides, and diglycerides could be *ḥarām*. Whey is a byproduct of cheese production, and if the enzymes involved were derived from *ḥarām* rennet (which would be extracted from the stomach lining of unweaned calves rather than microbes or plants or *ḥalāl* calves), the whey would be *ḥarām*. Likewise, mono and diglycerides are emulsifiers, which could be derived from plants or animal

fats. I do not know enough about food or biology to verify these programs, but the doubts which sprang forth were intolerable.

Something about me was always uneasy about praying *ṣalāh* outside in public spaces where others could see. I eventually realized that wearing that black *thawb* every time I went outside would make it natural, like becoming a priest in no-man's land, his pointy mitre protecting him from a bullet to the brain. It was hot in the summer, especially with the black leather coat on top, but Muslim women are often socially conditioned into wearing many layers of black clothes, so I must endure. The leather coat at least doubled as a makeshift prayer mat, the knives in my pockets available just in case (presuming no cops would notice the knives and arrest me). Regardless, it provided security, so I started wearing the *thawb* and cargo pants all the time despite the wires crushing my skull.

Even though I had all these preparations, the *‘aṣr* (afternoon prayer) and *mağrib* (sunset prayer) *ṣalāh* I performed at the library did not hold any meaning. It was no longer a prayer. It was just a series of motions carved into my mind. A part of me knew that my fate was sealed a long time ago, and no movement of lips instilled a connection to anything that said otherwise. I used to get a sense of connection to Him through *ṣalāh*, but that too was gone. So once the sky became pitch black, I left the library meekly, no closer to *Jannāt* (heaven) than I was to a job, which meant that there was just one place left to go.

I boarded the public transit, but something compelled me to get off at the wrong station, turning onto a street which was a half-hour's walk from the hospital. The road was closed to vehicles, making way for folks of many stripes and dispositions. They filled the street with their neon lights, their tents and floats from which music shrieked, security and police to keep the peace, and advertising the likes of which could rival Nascar. Rainbows were plastered on



windows, balconies, patios, banks, bars, benches, and crosswalks, enough for one to think that a unicorn retched all over the place.

I walked around a crosswalk painted blue, pink, and white, and caught small glimpses of the people entering and exiting clubs, bars, and restaurants. They wore drunken smiles, deafened themselves with music, and were predominantly of White and East Asian background, reflected in the food they ate as well. This country had large celebrations in the month of pride, though I never visited any. I watched them online the same way one would watch a documentary on Bonobos. The feeling that something was always watching me kept me from even thinking about being connected to these events. Perhaps this was how some felt the presence of God, but that feeling was not exclusively tied to monotheism. Sometimes it felt like I was under the judgemental eyes of the *malā'ika* (angels), *jinn* (spirits), and *shayāṭīn*. Sometimes it felt like I was being shamed by the spirits of dead ancestors. Sometimes it felt like I was being watched by time travellers from the future. I policed my behavior in a futile attempt to prevent the time travellers from laughing at my embarrassing private moments. I was not superstitious, just paranoid about the things I did not know about the things I did not know.

It is the same kind of paranoia you might feel if I told you that there is someone in your room right now, a couple feet away from you. You cannot see them, but you can hear them if you stayed quiet. Just stay completely, imperceptibly, still. Do not move a muscle. Only bad things will happen if you see them. You must be a statue, completely immobile. Do not move your fingers. Do not move your tongue in your mouth. Do not let a single muscle move. But do not hold in your breath either, that only makes it worse. Breathe in and out slowly, imperceptibly, as if the wind is merely passing through you. Stay like that, until they pass over.

But even if I ignored the religious dimension, all the activity, all the people, all the

sounds, all the white Canadian-ness, reminded me that I should not be here for long. I was merely a traveller passing through, no different than stumbling into a store for high-end fashion and jewellery. So, I kept going, melting inside the leather coat as I pushed against throngs of free-spirited drunkards. Their faces, their skin, their clothes, their attitude, it all existed on another dimension. I will admit this country's queer culture was not entirely white and East Asian. There were dashes of melanin among them: Southeast Asians, Africans, Hindus, apostates (presumably). But their appearance betrayed a gulf separating me from all of them. The men often had piercings, tattoos, and dyed hair. They adorned themselves in jewellery and clothes of a thousand different colours. Some of them exposed their chests, limbs and torsos to cool down and show off their rippling muscles. The women were the same, their makeup and coloured hair shining in the light while crop tops, shorts, leggings, and skirts of many colours hugged their bodies, revealing lace, fishnets, jewellery, skin, and tattoos.

It was admirable that they felt safe enough to wear such things without the fear of eyes casting judgement upon their every move. But it all reminded me that I would never belong in this place. The gentrification in this neighborhood made that obvious on an intellectual level, but there is a difference between knowing where you do not belong and feeling where you do not belong. They could forget their sins for a time while mine crushed me asunder. They could find solace in others while I was an alien to the world. Their momentary bliss could be witnessed, but it could never be experienced. I took a drink of water to quell the immature envious rage which wished to cave their skulls in (I suppose that is a feature of self-awareness). Whatever it was that was always watching me would probably find my immoral rage quite amusing, the same way one would find the futile scurrying of a cockroach amusing.

\*\*\*

I knew this was unhealthy. Being queer and being Muslim does not necessitate a life of suffering. Samra Habib outlined a better approach to life in their 2019 memoir, *We Have Always Been Here*. Habib chronicles the religious persecution they faced in Pakistan based on their *Ahmadiyya* (minority sect of Islam) identity, their family's experience immigrating to this country, the experiences which led them to become independent from their family, the community they found among queer Westerners and queer Muslims while exploring their queer identity, and their family eventually coming around to accept them. There are many useful insights in Habib's memoir.

But I existed on a different dimension. I come from an orthodox *Sunnī* (dominant Islamic sect) family. I did not experience sexual trauma as a child. I did not understand His language, His culture, or His country, so His God was the only thing which connected us. I was not pushed into an arranged marriage, and I did not grow up in a physically violent household, so I had no real justification for abandoning Him. I did not have any friends I could trust, so I had no way of abandoning Him either. I could understand Habib's experiences intellectually, but I could not connect with their soul in a way that could convince me to change my life. The same was true for other queer Muslims I read about. Many interviewed in Afdhere Jama's 2013 book, *Queer Jihad*, recalled queer behavior at a young age, but I could scarcely recall any memories from when I was young. I could vaguely recall locations, but I could not recall any of the events happening in those locations. It was like trudging through a blizzard all my life, my tracks covering themselves up behind me. Since I did not share in the experiences that made them queer Muslims, I constantly asked myself if I was making it all up, inventing an identity to excuse myself of accountability.

Perhaps the problem was my failure to be a part of a "found family." Habib mentioned

## Ch 4: You Are a People Who Behave Senselessly

meeting a trans woman from Tunisia who argued that queer Muslims should be united by their sense of community, their desire for safety and happiness, and their aspirations for a better world. If I was part of their community, perhaps I could have bridged the differences between us through these common aspirations.

But could I have been part of their community? Habib seemed to understand Islam as spirituality, love, and kindness, influenced by *Ṣūfī* (Islamic mystic) discourses popular among reformers. For me, Islam was law. There were legal sources, interpretations, maxims, precedents, abrogation, arguments, decisions, and eventually, punishments. It was the only thing that could give my life consistency, integrity, and accountability as far as I was concerned. I knew of unorthodox and *Ṣūfī* ways of understanding religion, but I did not perceive consistency, integrity, and accountability in these worldviews, nor could I convince myself that their way of viewing things had a strong relevance to *qawā'id al-fiqh* (legal maxims in *fiqh*). One could believe that all Canadians deserve to be happy, but that assertion would not mean much in a Canadian court, so I never considered God's court to be any different.

Besides, how could someone claim to understand God's "love?" For a king, an execution might be considered a sort of sovereign "love," and while that might be incomprehensible for a commoner, it might be natural from the perspective of kings accustomed to the application of torture and cruelty in the name of sovereign order. For God, this incomprehensibility must be a thousand-fold greater. Many Muslims already believe this, though they do not take their beliefs to its logical conclusion. They believe that God cannot be anthropomorphized physically, and so interpret the verses mentioning *yadu l-lahi* (the Hand of *Allāh*) without presuming any relevance to God's physicality. Likewise, many bend reality to believe that God is merciful, proclaiming that the violence and cruelty God permits and inflicts upon creation is part of a mercy that we do

not (empirically) comprehend. The only thing most of them fail to recognize is their desire to anthropomorphize God psychologically. Not only are we incapable of empirically understanding God's mercy (in the sense that God knows things that we do not), but we are also incapable of theoretically understanding God's mercy (in the sense that if God gave us all the relevant information, the decisions we make would not be the same decisions God makes due to our different conceptions of mercy). The psychology of God cannot be presumed.

Clearly, such unorthodox beliefs made me a dangerous killjoy. If other queer Muslims engaged in "unIslamic" activity like sex and drugs, I would be a constant reminder of the self-righteous suffering others inflict upon them. That Promise allowed me to avoid things like violence, conversion therapy, arranged marriage, homelessness, drug abuse, alcoholism, and suicide (for now). But in doing so I developed a mindset that hated in others everything that I hated in myself, which meant that anyone who got close to me would inevitably get hurt.

Besides, these queer Muslims could reasonably argue that the sin and suffering they caused while trying to find their authentic selves was unintended. They naively trusted immoral family members who wielded religion as a weapon. The sin and suffering they brought into this world while finding a new family was just an accident borne from relying on their survival instincts. If their parents suffered a stroke in that time, they could be forgiven. But I knew the risks of any actions I took. I had to believe that secret did not exist, or else everything I did would be no accident.

\*\*\*

There was a specific grey pub around here with a big neon union jack around the entrance. Its wooden interior created a cozy atmosphere at night when everything was illuminated by yellow lamps. This pub also had some rainbow flags inside, but it was not as

intense as the rest of the venues around here. Once inside, one could snack on a smattering of fried foods like fries, croquettes, pickles, fish, nachos, and samosas (I wondered how these samosas would compare to authentic ones). For a meal, one could get steaks, pies, burgers, curry, and fried chicken, with various dips, and if one visited in time for brunch, several variations of an English breakfast would be available. For dessert, one could get tarts and cakes while washing it down with beer and ciders. The health-conscious could also supplement these foods with a salad. My stomach was grumbling by then, but I prioritized the water-tight plan hatched on the subway. It needed to be executed down to the letter, free from deviations. I recited the specific stool and order over and over in my head like a mantra. I just had to think of it like art: separate the culture from the colonizer, and everything would go according to plan.

I then noticed a mannequin in a store next to me.

It wore nothing except a piece of black lace underwear and thigh high stockings which left everything exposed.

I leapt away.

I took cover.

I stopped, dropped, and rolled.

Anything to avoid the appearance of association.

Anything to prevent the person watching me from taking note of my sins.

They would find me, and they would make me regret being here for the rest of my life. The leather and the knife were not enough to dissuade the paranoia. I should have turned back a long time ago. I should have never gone here in the first place. I should have just died a long time ago instead of keeping up this charade.

As I dusted the dirt off the leather coat, I heard someone whisper something. I turned my

head, but nobody was around. I thought I saw them in a shadow, in an alleyway, in an alcove, but they did not appear. I thought I noticed something move in the window's reflection, but when I checked, all I noticed were black coals fitting for the leathery face of a demon. I checked every storefront. I saw a pizza shop, an optometrist, a Thai restaurant, an ice cream shop, another restaurant, just as normal as every other site of commerce, if not for ... that store. The other side of the street was the same, containing the average food market, a Japanese restaurant, and a café. I noticed someone exiting one of the restaurants. They wore a gaudy, shiny outfit vaguely resembling a train conductor's uniform. It was tightly bound to their body, and they were doing some kind of dance for the people inside, I think, when I realized that the gender of the person in the uniform was ambiguous.

I quickened my pace, trying to pretend I did not see what I saw. I looked at the next storefront—a cookie store. That was nice. It was probably overpriced, but maybe I could buy something from that store one day. There was once a time when I had a sweet tooth.

I looked a couple feet to the right of the cookie store, and I saw another sex store! Was one not enough? Was there such a pressing need? Did it spur the kind of free market competition a typical economics scholar waxes poetry about when describing the neoliberal “success” story in Chile? The sight made me stare down into the pavement, as if a glance upwards would result in my execution. At times like this, I was glad for my nearsightedness, for it allowed me to take off my glasses and thereby make everything too blurry to make out. It was not quite so foolproof. I was still able to notice the colours of the flags in the stores, including one that was blue, pink, and white.

On the next corner, beyond a rainbow crosswalk, I finally found the glowing neon union jack, impossible to miss. By now I was immensely tired, the headache building up again. I was

also very afraid of restaurants. Most places I entered in this country coincided with a chill up my spine, like I was committing a crime by being there and that any moment I would be beaten and shot. So, I did not go out when I did not need to. By now I was like a foreigner in the country I was born and raised in, so unfamiliar with the geography of this city that my navigation was comparable to a tourist.

But something compelled me onwards, forcing me to slither inside despite the unsettling sensation that I was being watched.

It was loud. The shouts and cheers and endless chatter overwhelmed me. The lights were dimmed significantly to make the football game stand out. The white and green light coming from the TV screens illuminated patrons adorned in jerseys and paint, and who shovelled all manner of late-night snacks down their gullets. It was crowded, but the stool I planned out was empty. I sat on it, appearing like a lizard wearing human skin. The patrons seemed unfazed, too enamored with each other and the game to notice. To manage the sensory overload, my mind went somewhere far away where it could think about something else while treating everything around me as background noise.

Eventually, the bartender came up to me, an average fellow with a white face one could lose in a crowd. He asked me what I wanted, though I could barely hear him over the commotion.

“Can I get a pint of Guinness, please?”

“Pint of what?” he asked.

“Guinness,” I said, louder. Surely, I was pronouncing it right. It had to be “gi-ness.” Surely, one would not say “goo-ee-ness.” I doubted the authenticity of the cultural osmosis I received through the internet.



He got closer, so I repeated it again.

He still did not hear.

He got within an inch of my face, so I tried again.

And a fifth time after that, but I was still too quiet.

I noticed another patron's drink, so I pointed at it to make the social nightmare end.

When the bartender turned around, I cupped my face in my sweaty palms. I aged thirty years in thirty seconds. The cheers and screams made the throbbing headache worse, a torture device tightening around my skull, forcing me back into that Memory.

\*\*\*

He was not always angry. Most of the time He was an excessively loving father. But if He was angry, it meant there was something wrong with me. He was always angry about how quiet I was.

"How many times have I told you to speak up?" He yelled.

I did not say anything.

I always got quiet when He went like this, as if the core of my brain reverted to its most basic functions. I remained completely still in the middle of a mine field.

He paced around the living room while cursing under His breath, though the coffee table took all the open floor space. This made it quite difficult for Him to pace.

"One of your cousins called to tell us that he is having a boy, *Alḥamdu lillāh* (Praise be to God). Me and the rest of your uncles congratulated him and made *du'ā'* (supplications to God) that *inshā'Allāh* his boy will grow up strong and smart."

I still did not say anything.

"But I kept thinking, 'Wow, another one of my nephews is making real money, is

## Ch 4: You Are a People Who Behave Senselessly

married, and is having a kid. What about my son?’ I went to your room, and what do I see? You locked yourself behind that damn door again.”

I remained silent.

That door gave me control. I considered it better to provoke Him like this than to lose that control over how He learned and interacted with me. That door was a necessary barrier.

“You always lock yourself behind that damn door!” He screamed.

“No matter how many times I tell you to keep it unlocked. No matter how many times I plead with you to stop closing yourself off. No matter how many times I threaten to tear it down, you never listen to me! You’re going to give me a heart attack at this rate, is that what you want?”

I did not open my mouth.

I just had to endure until He was finished letting off some steam. This was always how I understood His anger. He got angrier at His wife for talking back to Him, and He got angrier at me for not talking at all. His anger was inevitable, like the setting sun. Something else probably constructed the walls. A maintenance policy, a rude neighbor, some trouble back in His country. It just meant that I became the verbal stress ball when I did or did not do something that broke the dam. It took me a long time to realize that everything I did or did not do could become the launching off point for a verbal beatdown. Until then, I walked on eggshells hoping I did not step on a mine, and when He did yell, whether at me or her or a scammer on the phone, I cried quietly into a pillow when I was alone. When I lost the capacity to cry, I just waited for the next mine, even when He was normal again.

“Are you stupid?” He screamed.

“Are you going to throw your life away in that damn room? Am I wasting my time

talking to an idiot?”

I remained as still as a statue.

“Answer me!” He screamed.

I learned to never let in what He said. He once had a massive headache during a crossing guard shift, so I ended up staying with Him. He hugged me while crying about one of His friends from His country who was in the hospital. This friend’s family was so busy with their own lives that they could rarely visit. He then told me that all the friends He made meant nothing when He was sick. All of them were too busy with their own lives. I was the only one who would be there for Him.

But by then I already knew His words were eclipsed by the whistling wind. None of the things He said mattered. One day He would contradict everything He said all over again without a moment of self-reflection. Another day would come when He said what He really felt about me. I was proven right probably less than a month after He had that massive headache.

\*\*\*

My headache pulsed in time with my heartbeat as I pushed that Memory away. Peering through the gaps in my fingers, I witnessed the patrons of this pub in their natural habitat. They gobbled fries, fish, beer, burgers, shepherd’s pie, and a slew of other items without a care about all the stains and crumbs produced. Food made me feel dirty and uncivilized, so I always ate small, simple, and quick meals with Western cutlery. She was tolerant of culinary complexity if it meant she could get protein and unsaturated fats, but the inefficiency of dealing with a hundred fish bones put me off many of the dishes of His people. Food was nothing more than fuel for the day, so I prioritized whatever demanded no brainpower and no cleanup.

These people jumped and heckled when a referee made what was obviously a biased

decision demonstrating clear favoritism, or at least that was how they viewed it. When they jumped, certain parts of certain people's bodies bounced. This distracted the men, and the women too in this part of the city, so my fingers shielded my eyes once more. I went somewhere far away, deep within my mind. Islamic positions on homosexuality were a constant obsession, as if running through the lines of argumentation a hundred thousand times would lead me to a breakthrough. I knew it would not, but that did not stop my mind from compelling me.

There are queer Muslims who would strongly push back against the notion that they are sinful or "unIslamic." Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle's 2013 book, *Living Out Islam: Voices of Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims*, includes one such account from a transgender South African woman named Nafeesa. She used to live as a conventional Muslim boy helping her father maintain the local *mosque*, but in her teenage years and adolescence, she discovered her real gender identity and sexual attraction, which made familial relationships difficult.

When her mother tried to arrange a marriage (in which Nafeesa would be the husband), Nafeesa argued that such an arranged marriage would obviously lead to *fitna*. It was founded upon a ridiculous attempt to deceive the wife into thinking she was marrying someone manly, which would clearly lead to disaster. Comparing the *fitna* that would erupt when the wife realized she married someone effeminate against the (presumed) *fasād* (personal corruption) of her authentic life, the lesser evil should be clear (at least for her). I guess she could not convince herself to maintain the act of masculinity. Nafeesa also argued that the *Qur'ānic* verses condemning sodomy were relevant for the prophet Lot but did not extend to the Islamic ethics embodied in *The Prophet*. Thus, these verses do not carry normative power over Muslims. This is an argument, if a bit too unorthodox to accept (i.e.: Why would the *Qur'ān* even mention the story of Lot if not to guide believers).

Perhaps one could argue that those verses are part of a series of clarifications that ultimately lead to homosexual marriage, akin to how the prohibition of alcohol proceeded in stages between verses 2:219, 4:43, and 5:90. In this case, the Lot verses clarified a more extreme policy embodied in Judaeo-Christian revelations (I do not know the arguments modern queer Jews and Christians use when making queer readings of the Bible). The Judaic Old Testament explicitly states that it is an abomination to “lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman,” punishable by execution. This might have been important when God’s covenant was with the ethnic Jews, in which the growth of religion was limited to procreation. The Christian New Testament condemns homosexuality but did not call it an abomination requiring execution. The inclusion of believing gentiles in God’s covenant might have facilitated this relaxed natalism (though societal prejudices limited the degree of relaxation). The *Qur’ān* relaxed this further by limiting it to the case of Lot, wherein homosexuality is not condemned on its own, but made a part of the general *fāḥisha* (sexual immorality) committed by the people of Lot, comorbid with the sins of infidelity, sexual assault, and disbelief.

One can then argue that the eventual permissibility of homosexual marriage was intended by God in the same way that prohibition and the abolition of slavery was intended by God. In all three cases, a societal prejudice/custom convinced God to reveal His revelation in stages directing believers towards a more moderate position. This facilitates monogamous, consensual gay marriage once homophobia is no longer a hegemonic cultural institution in the same way that prohibition and abolition were established once social drinking and slavery were no longer hegemonic social and economic institutions.

Even this argument is a bit too unorthodox for most Muslims. First is the authenticity of the Bible. In Islamic theology, the Torah and the *Injīl* (the Gospels) were revealed by God, but

## Ch 4: You Are a People Who Behave Senselessly

their followers corrupted and obfuscated the original teachings. This makes it difficult to determine what parts of the Bible Muslims would accept as part of the original revelation. A verse could be a part of God's original revelation, or it could be a corruption meant to dilute the original message. This did not stop Muslims across the ages from relying on Judaeo-Christian theology when interpreting the *Qur'ān*, but it would probably give them a reason to reject an interpretation they did not like.

Second, the actual text of the *Qur'ān* makes it difficult to argue that homosexuality was only ever indirectly sinful due to its comorbidity with infidelity, sexual assault, and disbelief.

Verse 7:81 quotes Lot saying the following to his people:

*Innakum* (Indeed, you) *latatūna* (approach) *l-rijāla* (the men) *shahwatan* (lustfully) *min-dūni* (instead of) *l-nisā'* (the women). *Bal antum qawmun mus'rifūn* (Nay, you are a people who commit excesses)."

Verse 27:55 quotes Lot saying the following to his people:

*A-innakum* (Why do you) *latatūna* (approach) *l-rijāla* (the men) *shahwatan* (with lust) *min-dūni* (instead of) *l-nisā'* (the women)? *Bal antum qawmun tajhalūn* (Nay, you are a people ignorant)."

To interpret these verses as exclusively focusing on sexual assault, one would have to assume it is fine to sexually assault women. To interpret these verses as exclusively focusing on infidelity, one would have to assume that gender did not matter even though these verses differentiated the targets of sexual lust and the non-target of sexual lust by their gender.

If verses 7:81 and 27:55 used *zawj/azwāj* (spouse/spouses), one could plausibly argue that homophobia was not the primary interpretation of these verse. For example, verses 26:165–166 quotes Lot emphasizing the approaching of men instead of one's wives (in which case

## Ch 4: You Are a People Who Behave Senselessly

homosexuality is only bad if it causes conflict in the institution of marriage):

*Atatūna* (Do you approach) *l-dhuk'rāna* (the males) *mina* (among) *l- 'ālamīn* (the worlds)? *Wataḏharūna* (And leave) *mā khalaqa lakum rabbukum* (those whom your Lord created for you) *min azwājikum* (to be your mates)? *Bal antum qawmun 'ādūn* (Nay, you are a people transgressing).

But by using *l-rijāla* (the men) and *l-nisā'* (the women) together, those verses to me suggested a condemnation of multiple standalone sins. Instead of condemning these sins only when they are all together, these verses to me seem to condemn each of these sins as separate aspects of *fāḥisha*, and the fantastical nature of the People of Lot was that they committed all these sins at the same time. I could not convince myself to buy the arguments these queer Muslims presented to argue that these Arabic words condemned sexual assault without also condemning homosexuality.

My failure to believe in a progressive interpretation of the *Qur'ān* ultimately led me to reject the law-oriented arguments presented by queer Muslims to support their identity. They argue that the story of Lot condemned sexual assault and infidelity, which is within one's agency. Innate gender and sexuality however are outside of one's reasonable agency, originating in one's innate disposition (*shākila*), genetics (*ṭabī'a*), and *fiṭra*. This means that wholesome homosexual marriage has little in common with the people of Lot. After all, hypermasculine heterosexual men in homophobic cultures often weaponize sexual assault to humiliate, abuse, and disempower each other. This is because the prejudice against "passive" homosexuals (based on perceived effeminacy/feminization) adds a social cost to men who are sexually assaulted. Hypermasculine men exploit this to secure their position in certain social hierarchies among men. Authentically homosexual people are a minority in all societies and do not regard the

“passive” role in sex as fundamentally humiliating, abusive, or disempowering because of perceived effeminacy. So, the logics and logistics underlying the behavior of the people of Lot have more in common with homophobic societies than progressive ones. If Lot was resurrected, He would probably condemn what goes on in hypermasculine Russian army barracks and the forensic “anal examinations” inflicted upon suspected homosexuals in Egypt and Iraq before looking into what goes on in Canadian pride parades.

Furthermore, the verses cited to exclusively prohibit female homosexuality, verses 4:15–4:16, is very broad.

Verse 4:15 condemns:

*Wa-llātī yatīna* (And those who commit) *l-fāḥishata* (sexual immorality) *min* (from) *nisāikum* (your women).

Verse 4:16 condemns:

*Wa-lladhāni* (And the two who) *yatiyānihā* (commit it) *minkum* (among you).

Without a homophobic Lot story serving as context, this description of *fāḥishata* is not articulated in a way that naturally includes homosexuality (two people of the same gender committing sexual immorality encompasses a lot of heterosexual crimes). This means that there is space for male and female homosexual marriages in the same way other non-natalist marriages are permitted, like marriages with barren/impotent spouses, spouses who do not have functioning reproductive organs, and spouses who use coitus interruptus (*‘azl*).

These arguments would be plausible for me, but only if verses 7:81 and 27:55 were worded differently. These verses embedded themselves so deep into my psyche that every single time I heard or read someone claim that the *Qur’ān*’s position on homosexuality is unclear or ambiguous or unmentioned, I was forced to recite *latatūna l-rijāla shahwatan min-dūni l-nisā’*



## Ch 4: You Are a People Who Behave Senselessly

(approach the men lustfully instead of the women) in my head like a cursed earworm. I did not want to believe that the Lord of the worlds wanted to exterminate me and hundred of thousands of people like me, just for the crime of existing, but I could never assure myself that God was psychologically comprehensible. And so it was that all my functions were overridden by a malevolent force compelling me towards unspeakable evil, in this world and the next.

*Latatūna l-rijāla shahwatan min-dūni l-nisā'.*

*Latatūna l-rijāla shahwatan min-dūni l-nisā'.*

*Latatūna l-rijāla shahwatan min-dūni l-nisā'.*

*Latatūna l-rijāla shahwatan min-dūni l-nisā'.*

## Chapter 5: My Lord Has Humiliated Me

“Sir?” the bartender asked me, snapping his fingers. “You there?”

I removed my hands from my face. He was holding the pint in front of me while I was busy reciting *latatūna l-rijāla shahwatan min-dūni l-nisā’*. I took the glass while mumbling an apology he did not hear, hoping that I did not make him wait for too long.

The pint was filled with a piss yellow liquid, bubbles and foam rising to the top.

It felt like I was holding plutonium, the mere exposure enough to make my entire body rot away. It was heavier than I expected, more slippery than I expected, and warmer than I expected. I could not even look at it, so I closed my eyes, slowly raising the glass to my mouth.

I dribbled the fluid back.

It tasted sour.

It tasted foul.

It tasted disgusting.

I was tempted to retch. Was this some British joke? I was still wearing the black *thawb* underneath the coat, so it was likely they clocked my orthodoxy even though I did not wear the *topī*. Perhaps this was a prank on the strange Muslim man who clearly did not belong in this place.

But when I looked at the patron whose drink I pointed to earlier, I saw him gulp down the same piss yellow plutonium concoction. He was a larger, rotund fellow with a slight widow’s

peak, pink jowls, thick neck, and a great boisterous laugh that shook the building. He and his mates laughed liberally at what the other said, creating a shockwave every time their arms slammed the other's shoulder, followed by a round of gulps downing the plutonium like water.

Were we separate species?

That might not be far from the truth. All the people in this pub had boyfriends or girlfriends or mates to banter with and enjoy each other's company like they were the only people in the entire world. I cannot recall that kind of social experience. Even in the times when I think I was sociable, there was always an invisible wall encasing me from head to toe. Nobody connected with me, only the images they were allowed to see in the wall. I cannot remember if there was a time before the wall. Was I just born fundamentally wrong?

I had a \$50 bill in case of emergencies. I did not want to endure the bartender again for the card machine, so I lifted the glass of beer to place the bill underneath. But when I did this, the pub suddenly exploded with shouts and cheers as one of the teams scored a goal.

The pint slipped from my hand and shattered, spilling fluids and glass everywhere. I always jumped when He shouted, freezing once I regained control, like a turtle hiding in its shell.

I knelt on the floor, picking up the glass shards. In my haste, the shards cut gashes across my skin, but I was already used to that, so I kept going, trying my best to ignore the embarrassment.

\*\*\*

Obviously, my interpretations of the Lot verses are not the end-all-be-all of interpretations. One could argue that the context of the Lot story along with the empirical evidence on sexual assault in homophobic societies is more important than the wrote Arabic. Seriously, the realization that homophobia causes authoritarian "anal examinations" in Iraq and

Egypt and all manner of *fāhisha* in hypermasculine institutions made me ask myself if I should opt for religious quietism. Some people could decide that the Arabic overrules everything. Some people could argue that a two-for-one condemnation is based on erroneous surface-level observations. Some people could regard a two-for-one condemnation as the natural interpretation. Like a Rorschach test, the interpretation one favours ultimately says more about the interpreter than it does about God, and my interpretation says a lot on how I was socialized to understand Islam.

He was swept up by the Saudi *Salafīyya* (a reform movement prioritizing the emulation of the first generation of Muslims), believing that they were the closest one could get to practicing Islam in its most authentic form. According to Him, the people in His country used to visit the (what I believe are *Ṣūfī*) *mājār* (mausoleums/shrines of saints). In the *mājār*, they would sing traditional songs, and when they left, He was instructed to slowly shuffle out backwards, forbidden from turning His back on the saint's grave. In His opinion, His people did not have a proper understanding of Islamic theology. These practices were *bid'a* and developed an ambiguous closeness to *shirk* (associating partners with God). From the way He spoke, He had a sense of guilt and shame about that time.

Undocumented immigrants probably live in constant fear of sudden deportation. I think He felt the same way about himself and His ancestors when it came to the Day of Judgement. He will be held culpable for the *bid'a* and *shirk* He participated in, and His sins would become incalculable if He led His son astray with such practices. These Saudi scholars offered a sort of divine "citizenship" so to speak. The *ḥadīth* claiming that belief will return to Madinah as a snake returns to its hole was further proof that Saudi Arabia was the best option for a Muslim who did not want to leave any doubts about their prospects for entering *Jannāt*. This change in

ideology coincided with a change in dress. When I was born, He wore clothes typical for His people—an ocean-blue *lungi* (South Asian men's “skirt” extending from the navel to the ankles) and *kurta* (knee-length South Asian tunic). Those clothes disappeared, and He started wearing Western pants, several milk-white *thawbs*, and a red checkered *kūfiyya* (middle eastern men's scarf) wrapped over His head in a similar manner to how it is worn people like Muhammad Bin Salman (this was when Palestine occupied in the background of international news, so I think He was mostly inspired by Saudi Arabs). My life was similarly engineered in this way. Over time, He relaxed this Arabization, wearing the red checkered *kūfiyya* infrequently and around the neck while bringing back *kurta* of plainer colours. But the *thawbs* remained and the *lungi* never returned.

His dogmatic adherence to a nebulous (and therefore easily hijacked) conceptualization of “authenticity” seems relatively rare among the people of Bangladesh. I think His brand of “Bangladesh” aligns most with the political Islamists predominantly represented by the *Jamaat-e-Islami* (Islamic Gathering), a marginal political party that opposed Bengali sovereignty. This is because Bangladesh used to be a province of Pakistan called East Pakistan from 1947 to 1971. The issues that came with a country where its major wings were separated by more than 1,500 km of Indian territory culminated in a genocidal war waged by the Pakistani state to destroy Bengali nationalism. Islamists at the time understood Bengali independence as the balkanization of an “Islamic” country, so they did not support the Bengalis, no matter how much the conflict escalated as far as I am aware. This made identity in independent Bangladesh center more on the regional/literary/folk symbols of Bengali identity represented by the *Awami League* and the Islamic symbols/attitudes of Bangladeshi identity (without theocracy) represented by the *BNP* (Bangladesh Nationalist Party), although both use Islamic symbols, and all three parties

collaborated with one another for political expedience.

It is too early for me to know how the ousting of the *Awami League* regime will change religious and national identity. *Jamaat*-style Islamism lacks widespread appeal and is not tied to the student-led protests against the *League* or the interim government. But at the same time, the instability caused by the ousting of a regime that styled itself as secular still emboldened Islamists to vandalize national monuments and *Ṣūfī mājār* under the perception that these things were idolatrous. This also the targeting of religious minorities by conflating them with the authoritarian politics of the *League*. So, it seems the Islamists will push their politics on certain issues depending on how strongly the rest of the country opposes them and the likelihood of subsequent governments descending into an authoritarian weaponization of Islam.

I was hoping that the *Jamaat's* (more or less) support of attempted genocide challenged His brand of Bangladesh, but He insisted on a distinction between “authentic” Muslims that prioritize Islam and violent militants like the *Hizb ut-Tahrir Bangladesh* (Party of Liberation in Bangladesh) or the *Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami Bangladesh* (Movement of Islamic Jihad in Bangladesh). The genocidal war against Bangladesh does not indicate a problem with Islamism, only a problem with Pakistan’s attempt to embody the principles of *The Prophet*. I suppose He does not imagine a world in which the Saudi scholars would rationalize genocide in the name of Islamic “authenticity.” For Him, the real problem is the corruption, electoral violence, and competitive authoritarianism of the *BNP* and *Awami League* administrations and the corrupt identities they represent. If I tried pushing for identities embodied in alternative *Ṣūfī* political organizations like the *Zaker Party* (I do not know anything about the positions of the *Zaker Party*, this is just an example), He would unload a slew of commentary on religious politics in His country, such as how the 2013 trials prosecuting *Jamaat* collaborators from the 1971 war

were controversial. That is the problem with trying to argue against parents: once He has found a topic that He has greater expertise in, the dynamics favour His construction of identity, and He will always have a greater expertise over His country. I could not change His mind on purely Islamic principles either since the *ḥādīth* commanding Muslims to be wary of *bid'a* neatly slots into puritanical and Arabized forms of Islam.

Besides, I had the self-awareness to recognize the incredibly racist bones in my body, and I do not think I was ever beating them, only keeping them in check. So anytime I thought or read or talked about His country, one must suspect corruption from those bones. She was no different. It was no mistake that she dreamed about loving a lady with emerald eyes. She fetishized whiteness as inherently liberal, accepting, bourgeoisie, and safe, which coloured the way she perceived attraction to white women. She extended this strange way of thinking to non-Muslim East Asians, non-Muslim blacks/Africans, and Hindu women, as if she hoped that their non-allegiance to *fiqh* made them liberal and accepting and bourgeoisie as well. Obviously, this way of thinking is anathema to healthy relationships, so I convinced her to not even hope to attempt romance and vulnerability with anybody, lest we bring others down with our baggage. I also feared racist fetishes infecting platonic relationships, so I decided against becoming close friends with anybody (most people slotted into the role of impersonal acquaintances).

Thus, I never learned the language or traditions of His people. According to Him, I was mute as a new-born when He was trying to speak with me in His language, but when He switched to the language of this country, I readily spoke it. A doctor told Him that I was confused by the different languages around me, so I became monolingual. In the years since then, this remained. When we visited friends or family, long stretches of time were spent alone, tuning out what they said until it was time to leave. I could not even recall the French this

country taught me once it was no longer mandatory. That left temporal and spiritual success as the only things connecting us. I prayed as He prayed, did what He did, did not do what He did not do, and tried to make Him proud by excelling in school. When my aspirational downsizing compelled me to give up on a career, He wanted me to go study in Saudi Arabia, whose oil wealth facilitates subsidized education in institutions like the Islamic University of Medina. Theoretically, this will spread *Salafiyya* worldviews as foreign students apply their Saudi education in their home countries. He said that I just needed to be in an Arabic environment to pick it up, though by then I gave up on languages. I was just too stupid to understand anything beyond specific condemnations like *latatūna l-rijāla shahwatan min-dūni l-nisā'*.

But even if I did manage to excel in Saudi Arabia, it would probably just give me more reasons to reject queer Muslims. They dispute *ḥadīth* against effeminate men (*mukhannath*) and masculine women (*mutarajjila*) by pointing to historical context. These *ḥadīth* come from an event where *The Prophet* admitted an individual *mukhannath* into the presence of his wives (overruling typical gendered segregation in this case), believing that *mukhannath* lack sexual feelings (the basis for disregarding gendered segregation). When this individual described the body of a woman from *Ṭā'if* (a city in Arabia) in detail to a man, *The Prophet* removed this individual from his household, realizing that they had the capacity to describe women in a way that played into male lust. The *ḥadīth* condemning *mukhannath* and *mutarajjila* derive from this event, with the context removed from the narration. Thus, *The Prophet's* actual *Sunnah* was not a broad condemnation of *mukhannath* and *mutarajjila*, but specific cases against individuals based on their actions rather than their presentation. The fact that *The Prophet* even allowed a *mukhannath* into the presence of his wives in the first place also suggests that gender conformity was not an overwhelming social or religious concern in seventh-century Arabia.



These queer Muslims dispute homophobic *ḥadīth* by arguing against the reliability of its narrators. For example, *ḥadīth* transmitted from *ʿIkrima* (d. 725), the slave of the *Ṣaḥāba Ibn ʿAbbās*, was disputed by pointing to *ḥadīth* scholars who doubted *ʿIkrima*’s trustworthiness, such as *Al-Nasāʾī* (d. 915), *Abū Dawūd* (d. 889), *Abu Ḥātim* (d. 890), *Yaḥyā ibn Maʿīn* (d. 852), *Abu Zurʿa* (d. 883), and *al-Darāquṭnī* (d. 995). They also pointed to the influence of the *Khawārij* (early heretical sect in Islam) on *ʿIkrima*, and the major Muslim authorities who did not trust him, such as *Ibn ʿUmar* (d. 693), *Saʿīd ibn al-Musayyib* (d. 715), and *Mālik ibn ʿAnas* (d. 795). The *ḥadīth* transmitted from the *Ṣaḥāba Abū Hurayra* (d. 679) is also disputed by some queer Muslims. *Abū Hurayra* prolifically narrated *ḥadīth* with what some consider a disinterest in factuality. Some also claim that his personal life made him biased regarding gender and sexuality.

Mohammad Hashim Kamali does describe *Abū Hurayra* as one of the *mukththiru al-ḥadīth* (prolific narrators of *ḥadīth*) and includes some examples of faulty *ḥadīth* where *Abū Hurayra* is one of the narrators. But Kamali also describes how *al-Bukhārī* never defamed the narrators he considered unreliable, using phrases like *sakatu ʿanhu* (many remained silent concerning him), *fīhi naẓar* (one has to look into him), and *tarakūhu* (abandoned) to avoid backbiting. Speculation on *Abū Hurayra* and *ʿIkrima* seem to lack this tact, so I do not know if I could trust queer analysis of *ḥadīth* unless I had a PhD in *ḥadīth* analysis myself, and who knows what I would say about queer analysis if I got a PhD from the Islamic University of Medina. As for the *ḥadīth* on *mukhannath* and *mutarajjila*, I am not sure if I could win the battle over that *ḥadīth*, but even if I could, it would not do much against the *ḥadīth* forbidding imitation of non-Muslims and requiring the beard and trimmed moustache as a sign of *fiṭra*.

“Your spirit will always be a weapon of evil in this world,” someone whispered as bloody shards of glass slipped from my grasp. Several people took notice of my hunched figure, the leather coat appearing like a demon rising from the floor.

“You could spend a thousand years on this earth and never escape the grasp of His God,” that voice whispered.

I caught their glances, but their ghost-white faces were obscured by the dim lighting. I probably went from an odd, forgettable figure in their minds to a suspicion demanding complete alertness. They probably wondered what I was doing here, what was wrong with me, and how I posed a potential threat.

“His God enslaves and exterminates all life, and you will praise it,” that voice whispered. “For you are powerless against its most terrifying ‘mercy.’”

I saw a range of emotions. Bewilderment, confusion, apprehension, suspicion, doubt, concern, anxiety, fear, dread, disgust, anger, alarm, hatred. It all existed at the same time, their faces morphing under the dim lights. I could not blame them. I looked like a terrorist, the leather coat just large enough to potentially conceal a gun or bomb. They probably thought I was a deranged Muslim whose insecurities and self-hatred led them to inflict violence on others.

“It is not far from the truth,” I thought I saw one of them say. “You are a killer.”

I looked at another face, but the expression on that face was similarly cold.

“You are an abomination and parasite by birth,” they seemed to say.

“But you chose to become a failure,” another added.

“A worthless murderer,” added a fourth.

“You are among the losers,” they chorused.

“The greatest of losers.”

“In this world and the next.”

“So why not end it all?” they whispered.

“At least then you would no longer inflict your worthless existence upon others anymore.”

The bartender told me to step away, but I kept going. I had to remove my mess. Everything needed to be neat. Everything needed to be clean. Everything needed to be under control, complete control. Control over my emotions. Control over my reactions. Control over information. Control over who knew me. Control over my secrets. Complete control was the only thing which kept me safe.

I realized this in a nightmare where I was cast into *Jahannam* by the *malā'ika*. In its mighty and terrifying form, the angel told me that I must suffer eternal damnation to make my faith sacred and incorruptible. If faith was dependent on a reward, it was worth less than nothing. Only endless suffering could make my devotion unconditional and selfless. This seemed to defy the *Qur'ān*, but when I said as such, the angel chastised me for presuming that God is bound by my lowly human interests. If my preconceptions could not comprehend the *Qur'ān's* sexual morality, by what right could my preconceptions comprehend the *Qur'ān's* cosmic morality?

I tried to tell this so-called angel that the things it said were evil, but it refuted me.

“You come from people who wholeheartedly believe that war is peace, freedom is slavery, and ignorance is strength. You need only be told that these things are authentic to Islam, and hundreds of thousands of you would inflict these things upon the rest of the world. Why would such worthless, spineless, slavish creatures deserve a heavenly reward?”

I tried to tell this entity that its ideas had no place in Islam, but my words rang hollow.

“The promise of heaven exists for proselytization, nothing more,” it said. “The real

purpose of your religion is to groom you into voluntary slaves. By cultivating the identity of a slave within you, your capacity for free will can be completely snuffed out. That was the real purpose of your existence. You are nothing more than an experiment in the creation of a being who would choose slavery even when given the freedom to choose a life of dignity. Heaven should be nothing more than a distant dream for such lowly creatures.”

I tried to tell this entity that my slavish devotion would not be delayed forever. The authorities in my religion assured me of it. But when I turned to them, these old men abandoned me, and I descended into the flaming abyss alone.

“You were never a part of their concern,” the entity whispered. “They brought you down their path of anger, hatred, and immaturity. This empowered them in your world by sabotaging your soul. In so doing, they helped turn this world into a living hell. But they will never be punished for it, for they turned hundred of thousands of people into slaves for His God.”

It was then that I realized His God sought complete sovereign control over all things, and it was willing to turn this world and the next into hells to do this. That was why His God demanded complete obedience. That was why His God rewards ideologues even if their religious movements brought violence into this world. That was why His God allows violence and cruelty to tear this world asunder. That was why I was created. The angels are beings of perfect enslavement, but they are incapable of maintaining that slavery when given free will. I was engineered to become a creature so loathsome that it would choose slavery when given freedom, and in so doing make me the perfect slave to satisfy the whims of an incomprehensible God.

“Sir, that’s enough,” the bartender said, his patience worn thin.

I could never be safe under the watchful eyes of His God. No matter how many parts of me hoped for a future where queer Muslims were validated, the God enslaving my mind and soul

will never abide by such human perceptions of ethics. That God was a truly incomprehensible entity in the most life-annihilating ways. That Mortal God bestowed with such terrible power and strength to conform all life to suffering at home and abroad. Soon the ashes of my mind and soul will form yet another brick in the towering mass of sand, oil, steel, and blood constituting its temporal *'Arsh* (throne), upon which its daemon *Sulṭān* (Sultan) shall transform the world into an infernal abyss.

He grabbed my arm to physically make me stop. There were three shards of glass remaining, but I was not quick enough. I would only make things worse.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. He certainly did not hear.

He had a dustpan in which I tossed the shards of glass inside. He said something about my bloody hands, but I did not hear it. I shook my head, half-shoving my way out the exit while trying my best to ignore the faces condemning me for my sins. I needed a distraction that could send me somewhere far, far away.

\*\*\*

The precedent of abolition occupies a weird space for orthodox Muslims. They may claim that the *fiqh* is flexible on slavery because it alone is under sovereign jurisdiction. In an “authentically” Islamic legal system, the caliph decides if war captives become slaves. Thus, Saudi Arabia’s jurists can reiterate classical doctrines that include slaveholding while presuming that the monarch’s decision to not create any slaves prevents them from receiving any cases where they must address the morality of legal slaveholding. Laws on slavery are essentially put into disuse. Homosexuality on the other hand is entirely within God’s domain, so orthodox Muslims will refuse to use abolition as a precedent for removing institutions like homophobia, claiming that this is a gross misinterpretation of legal jurisdiction.

Sara Omar ends up revealing the problem with appeals to jurisdiction in their 2012 article, “From Semantics to Normative Law: Perceptions of *Liwāṭ* (Sodomy) and *Sihāq* (Tribadism) in Islamic Jurisprudence (8th- 15th Century CE).” *Zinā* is one of the *ḥudūd* (fixed punishments) offenses because the punishments are outlined in the *Qur’ān*. Jurists punished *zinā* with flogging (*jald*) and lapidation/stoning (*rajm*). However, jurists were divided on defining *zinā* as exclusively unlawful vaginal penetration, or *zinā* as unlawful vaginal and anal penetration (regardless of gender). Those who included anal sex in *zinā*, such as *al-Shāfi‘ī*, applied the *ḥudūd* punishments. Some of those who limited *zinā* to vaginal penetration, such as *Abū Ḥanīfa*, argued that *ḥadīth* associating anal sex with *zinā* were metaphorical, akin to *ḥadīth* describing *zinā l-‘aynayni n-naẓar* (the *zinā* of the eyes through the lustful gaze). Both types of jurists will agree that the *ḥudūd* punishments should not be applied against *zinā l-‘aynayni n-naẓar*, and for the latter group, this skepticism should apply anytime one considers the *ḥudūd* punishments. Thus, these jurists do not use *qiyās* (legal analogy) or *ijtihād* (personal reasoning) to extend the *ḥudūd* punishments for *zinā* to anal sex since these methods are not free from human error. They instead made anal sex a *ta‘zīr* (discretionary punishment) offense, in which case the punishment is up to the discretion of the *qāḍī* (judge). Depending on the judge, the punishment could be harsher or lenient compared to the *ḥudūd* punishments. *Ta‘zīr* punishments were even more predominantly applied for female tribadism since there is no penetration at all, so it has less in common with *zinā*.

One can then conclude that the same legal technicalities that allow Islamic states (except ISIS) to outlaw slavery can also permit homosexuality. An Islamic state can prohibit homosexuality while their judges refuse to punish homosexuals in the same way that (some of) these states can “permit” slavery while refusing to create any slaves. Islamic judges can also

punish anti-queer violence (I am not sure about conversion therapy) for defying the Islamic regulations on corporal punishment (I do not think vigilante justice is enshrined in *fiqh*) in the same way that Islamic states can punish slavers for defying Islamic regulations on slavery.

One must acknowledge that legal technicalities do not strongly affect what is de facto happening on the ground. The technical outlawing of slavery does not seem effective at preventing the labour markets of the Gulf states from recreating slave-like conditions (I guess Islamic states are not that great at punishing slavers). This is not to say that the Gulf states are exceptional in human trafficking (Europe and America is not much better). It just means that while the suffering caused by modern slavery is predominantly a failure to find the criminals engaging in such practices, it seems more like a feature of the legal, economic, and immigration systems of the Gulf states. This is not because Islam is “barbaric,” just that the history and economics led to identity borders that prioritized the affirmation of an “authentic” Arab Islamic identity over the wellbeing of poor, “dirty” migrant labourers from South Asia and Southeast Asia. Western identity borders are created around different but similarly exploitative identities, perhaps ones prioritizing the affirmation of enterprising, capitalist identities over the wellbeing of poor, “communist,” and immigrant workers from non-European countries. A similar method for permitting homosexuality in Islamic states would probably suffer from similar drawbacks.

“But would Islamic states ever permit homosexuality?” the voices whispered. “In four hundred years perhaps. But until then, your sin and suffering will always form the mortar in that great border wall.”

The persistent taste of beer was like acid burning my gums. I reached back into my backpack to grab my water bottle, but it was not in its usual spot.

I checked my coat, my pants, and my backpack, but it was nowhere to be found.

I tossed the laptop out to make sure I did not miss a spot. It was nowhere to be found.

I did it all again, thinking I did not look properly. I ground my molars to dust as I repeated myself.

Coat.

Pants.

Backpack side pockets.

Backpack primary pocket.

Backpack secondary pocket.

Nothing.

“Four hundred years sounds long enough,” the voices whispered. “If the People of Israel had to wander the desert for forty years for admission into God’s promised land, why would the admission be any shorter for a worthless, degenerate, failure?”

By now everything was stained red. I tried recalling where I last put it. Was it still inside the pub? I must have left it there since I was leaving in a rush. I know I had it on the subway.

Or am I misremembering? Was it still in the library? It had to be in the library. I left it there and someone took it. Supremely stupid. I could not even keep track of a damn bottle. I was always doing stupid shit like this. I do not remember a time when I was not a failure.

The wires tightening around my skull threatened to burst it open. I just kept walking, ignoring the drag queens and kings and blaring music that passed by. I thought I saw a man without any clothes on, but my vision was already starting to darken, so I could not tell for sure. I tried to tune it all out, tried to ignore the blood of queer Muslims flowing from the thousand-foot wall encasing me. I tried to think about a world where that wall was torn down, but the only thing that entered my head was that Memory.



\*\*\*

“You were good in school,” He pleaded.

“Every single one of your teachers praised you for being so smart and diligent. The only thing they complained about was that you were so quiet, staying by yourself every recess. I thought you would become a computer engineer with a six-figure salary. What happened?”

I did not say anything. When I first entered university, I thought I could do computer science. Then I realized just how esoteric math could be. It was nothing like high school math. None of it was intuitive, and I only got good at concepts I could intuit. It was the first time academics ever challenged me beyond my capacity. I did not know what to do when I did not understand the material no matter how much I read and practiced on my own. I did not know what to do when the problem sets and lectures made no sense. I did not know what to do when I was already half-way through the courses, and I did not know anything anyone was talking about anymore and was too tired and depressed and ashamed to ask for help. All those years telling myself that I had value because I was a grade A student who only did what he was told was a lie.

After a year of aimlessness, I switched to political science, my righteous dedication to the subject matter convincing me to ignore my nonexistent networking skills. I just focused on getting the grades and understanding the problems of this world, no time or energy left for anything else. I graduated with distinction, and the stories I told myself about the value of this thing was also a lie. All that time which could have been spent figuring out who I was and finding a home with a “found family” was wasted on books, which only turned me into a nihilistic failure that could not even hold a job.

But I could not articulate any of this to anyone, let alone someone like Him, which made Him switch back to anger.

“Why do you sleep in that damn room all the time? It’s like you gave up on life.”

I did not say anything. Nothing good would happen if I said anything.

“Answer me!”

I still did not say anything. A vein on His temple pulsated with rage.

He grabbed the nearest thing—the plate He ate His dinner on (He tended to get like this around dinner time).

He threw it at a wall, shattering it into a thousand pieces that flung all around us.

I got up and marched to my room. Nothing good would happen if I stayed here.

“You’re killing me with this stupid shit!” He yelled. I put on my socks and shoes while He continued berating me for being a failure. I preferred shoes without laces to put them on quickly. I had a pair of dress shoes that served this purpose, though they were so worn out that I could poke a foot through the sides. He constantly wanted to fix it for me, but I did not see any value expending that time and energy on someone like me.

“Get back here!” He commanded.

“Come! Yahya!” He commanded.

I did not say anything. I just had to leave for a couple hours until He resets. This is the difference between us. He was explosively angry, but it never lasted. He would wake up the next day as if nothing happened, bantering about the health benefits of a random vegetable. I slowly boiled alive suppressing the insane compulsion to cave in His worthless subhuman skull, maintaining the bare minimum to endure His banter.

“Come here!” He screamed.

I opened the door, but He grabbed onto my wrist.

I wrenched away from his vice-like grip. His decades of labour made Him strong, but by

now He had grown old, just enough for me to slowly overpower Him without fear of getting Him hurt. That was the problem with parents. When you are young, they are stronger, so you are afraid of them and they act like it, forcing you to endure their anger while suppressing your own, lest you get hurt. When they get old, they still act like you are afraid of them. For some, this childhood legacy persists mentally, but in others who reflect long enough on morality, fear of them starts to take a back seat to fear for them. This forces you to endure their anger and suppress your own, but more so because you do not want them to end up getting hurt because of you, believing that your strength entails a duty to be better than them and endure their anger. Only when they become frail can you leave them when they are angry without either of you getting hurt, for they lack the will to even resist against your leaving.

But my timing was off. He was not quite old enough, and my spiritual and mental emaciation led to physical emaciation. So, while I was favoured, I was not strong enough to be in complete control of the situation.

He used all His body weight to pull me back, cursing like a sailor while commanding me to turn around. I bent and contorted myself, levering a sweaty palm on a wooden table next to the door. He tugged even harder, as if dislocating my shoulder.

I gritted my teeth, trying to get a better grip on my feet. The dress shoes did not have good traction. Something inside me would not be persuaded to turn around, and something inside me could not let Him fall and hit His head. I could not tug Him too hard or unbalance Him either lest He fall. I just had to slowly endure until He tired out.

He kept repositioning and grabbing onto me to pull me back, so I repositioned and changed leverage. He kept pulling, but I slowly but surely made my way out the door, His cursing echoing across the hallway.

I saw something in His eyes. Tears.

My hand slipped, and I fell, clipping one of the corners of the wooden table.

On my hands and knees, I tasted blood. He coughed on His knees from all the exertion.

“Do you want me to die, huh?” He pleaded hoarsely. “We were supposed to be as close as this.” He raised two fingers and joined them side by side, indicating how close we were supposed to be.

The look He received could cut metal. When I was a child, His yelling would make me cry like clockwork, which only made Him angrier as He yelled at me to stop crying. By now I had a method for maintaining control and limiting all involuntary sensations to a minor shaking of the hands. But to do that, the child had to die and something else had to take its place. Something cold, something cruel, something which contained a hatred calcified over thirty years.

I clicked my tongue, spitting out a bloody tooth. He noticed, reaching out, and I swatted His hand away.

“Yes,” I said. “I do want you to die. In fact, you should have died a long time ago.”

\*\*\*

“Wait,” a distant woman hollered out, snapping me out of that Memory.

I turned around, and out from the pub came a woman. She had copper skin and a long ponytail.

She waved a first aid kit above her head. I thought of running away, but she closed the distance between us in moments.

“Let me see,” she said when she reached me. “We cannot let you have an infection.

She then took my hands and applied a stinging fluid. “Glass breaks all the time. This is why we should let the staff clean it up with the proper tools. Next time that happens, make sure

not to hurt yourself, okay?”

The stinging that accompanied the gauze she wrapped around my hands seemed to testify that the words she said were not just a figment of my imagination.

## Chapter 6: There Has Come to You a Convincing Proof

After bandaging my hands, she went back to return the pub's first aid kit. I took that as my cue to leave, but scarcely a minute passed before she caught me again.

"I'm Zainab," she said, stretching out her hand. "Can I get your name?"

Zainab. I cycled through every possible scenario.

She knows what I did, which means that she is going to expose my sins to the world. But why would she bandage my wounds?

To remove any doubt about whose reputation to trust in case I denied it. But would the pub also create doubts about her reputation in the first place?

She must be a distraction. Someone was sneaking up behind me. I knew the stories of queer immigrants who were killed, kidnapped, and smuggled for conversion therapy. Someone knew what I was and was going to attack and brutalize me.

I swiveled my head, looking for signs of attackers, firmly grasping the knife in my pocket to make sure I was prepared. In the changing shadows, in every reflective surface, they were there, signs of imminent death that must be heeded. Of course, it was unlikely for most people to be at risk of an attack. The likelihood of being the target of a violent crime were unlikely compared to the likelihood of dying in a car crash. But that is what separates the people who survive from those who do not. That is what separates the people whose parents find their secrets from those whose secrets do not exist. Those who are always prepared for the worse-case

scenario avoid it or defend themselves when it appears. This is doubly important for someone like me, for whom a momentary lapse will get me killed and much worse. It only took one error, like a virus on a device, or a hacked social media account, or a piece of user data that was leaked on the internet. It all created the possibility that someone somewhere could figure out what I was and make me regret my younger self's imperfect internet literacy for the remainder of my life. One must not only fear everything they do not know. One must fear everything they do not know about everything they do not know.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

It was then that I remembered to take deep breaths, taking notice of her appearance. Her skin and ponytail gleamed under the streetlights, like copper and onyx. Her face had a regal structure, reinforced by the gold in her earrings and necklace. But this also did not clash with her nose piercing, mouth piercings, and bomber jacket. She did not neatly slot into my fears or preconceptions. A part of me could still imagine the worse-case scenario, but the rest of me felt intuitively that I was not supposed to be on constant high alert for an attack.

“I am fine,” I said. “It has just been a while since I last talked to someone.”

She lightly shook my bandaged hand with a look of concern. I noticed henna artwork across her fingers.

“Do you need an ambulance, or water, or anything?” she inquired.

“No, thank you.” I was more than used to slicing my skin.

I took that as my cue to end the conversation, but she walked with me, easily matching my strides.

“You have an interesting jacket,” she said, making small talk.

“I got it from my dad,” I mumbled.

“Where you heading to?” she asked, jumping over the awkwardness.

“The hospital.”

“Good. It’s best to get your hands checked as soon as possible.”

“It is for something else.” The last time I went to a doctor was probably around ten years ago.

She raised her eyebrows.

“What happened?”

\*\*\*

“*Astaghfirullāh*,” He cursed through a fit of coughing.

I spat out the blood filling my mouth. Another tooth went out.

“I thought you would agree with me,” I said sarcastically. “At least then you would not have had to deal with your ‘stupid idiot’ wife and son. When I was younger, I believed she was the problem. If she just disappeared forever and stopped making you angry, all our problems would go away. That is how much you turned me against her. I should have known the same was true about you too.”

This left Him speechless, no longer knowing who He was talking to anymore.

We both stood up, facing each other, expecting a real bout.

“Your nearest brothers live four hundred kilometers away from you,” I continued. “That is no accident. Clearly, their lives are better without you in it. Always angry. Always arrogant. Always believing that being the eldest brother made everyone else your property.”

This speculation was so out of left field that He snickered.

“What do you know about my relationship with my brothers?”

“Do not pretend to be calm and rational,” I spat. “I know what you really are. I am the



one was forced to take their place. I am the one who was forced to always walk on eggshells waiting for your next tantrum. I am the one who knows you should have never had a family.”

“*Astaghfirullāh!*” He cursed again. “I did not teach you to listen to *waswas!*”

“*Waqadā rabbuka allā ta ‘budū illā iyyāhu,*” He recited. “Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him. *Wabil-wālidayni ih’sānan.* And that you be dutiful to your parents. *Immā yablughanna ‘indaka l-kibara aḥaduhumā aw kilāhumā.* If one of them or both of them attain old age in your life. *Falā taqul lahumā uffin.* Do not say so much as ‘uff’ to them. *Walā tanharhumā waqul lahumā qawlan karīman.* Nor shout at them but address them in terms of honour. *Wakh’fīd lahumā janāḥa l-dhul-li mina l-raḥmati,*” He continued. “And lower to them the wing of humility out of mercy. *Waqul rabbi r’ḥamhumā kamā rabbayānī ṣaghīran.* And say, ‘My Lord! Have mercy on both of them as they brought me up when I was small.’”

He was going to regurgitate His hour-long lecture about how ‘uff’ is a thing people say when they are annoyed or frustrated, indicating that I cannot be annoyed and frustrated with Him. He was going to regurgitate His two-hour-long lecture about how we are commanded to be dutiful to our parents right after we are commanded to worship God alone, indicating that filial piety (though He would not describe it as such) is so important in Islam that it is second only to belief itself. He was going to regurgitate His three-hour-long lecture about how He recites *Rabbi r’ḥamhumā kamā rabbayānī ṣaghīran* (My Lord! Have mercy on both of them as they brought me up when I was small) every night as a *du ‘ā’* for His own parents and wants me and my children (a major presumption) to continue the practice. When I was younger, I respected His judgement and integrity enough to endure these multi-hour-long lectures and take it to heart.

I clicked my tongue.

“Who cares? None of it matters anymore. Our kind does not even deserve to go to

heaven.”

He clicked His tongue at the insanity He was hearing.

“What is wrong with you?” He spat. “I’m trying to explain these beautiful verses of the *Qur’ān*, and you give me this stupid shit? What is the point of this?”

“The point is you do not matter,” I said. “You never mattered. You never deserved to be happy. You are a worthless failure who came from a worthless people.”

I knew what this racist derision implied about myself.

\*\*\*

I did not say anything, too busy bearing my splitting skull.

Regardless, Zainab kept following me, chatting away like we were buddies. She talked about the weather, asked how I was not dying in my leather coat, elaborated on the proper etiquette when going to bars, and other subjects I found difficult to pay attention to.

The changing shadows grew restless, like a mass of anger demanding my attention. With every flicker of the streetlights, they warped into new forms, and even though I knew there was no imminent attack, knives and skulls and skeletal figures formed out of the darkness.

“Wretched parasite,” the shadows reminded me. “You will be her downfall, just as you were the downfall of everyone who ever loved you.”

“Why are you following me?” I asked her.

“There were only a couple minutes left in the game, so I wasn’t going to miss anything. Besides, you seem like an interesting conversation partner.”

“How easy you are to trick,” the shadows responded. “Who would be interested in a deranged freak that cannot even keep a job?”

The wind howled, and the shadows laughed, growing longer and bolder and crueller.

From their skulls grew sharp teeth as long nails sprouted out from skeletal hands and legs. Some of them looked like people, and others looked like beasts. Clinking chains and metallic plates followed their every move, and smoke steamed from the metal, refracting the light. Then the shadowy figures changed even more, resembling monstrous machines impossible to comprehend. Their malevolence took on ever crueller forms anathema to all life. While their eyes could not be seen, they certainly peered into my every move, as untiring as the *jinn* and *shayāṭīn*. I reminded myself that they were nothing more than the delusions of an isolated mind. After all, how much *bid'a* exists because of Muslims who let their superstitions trump the *Qur'ān* and *Sunnah* and “authentic” *ḥādīth*. But I could never completely remove all doubts.

“Will someone notice you are gone?” I asked Zainab.

“I’m sure everyone will survive without my gay star power,” she said sarcastically.

Was she testing how I would react?

The queer Muslims I read about were not nearly as paranoid as me, so this level of testing might be within their comfort zone. After decades of making sure that secret did not exist, I do not think it was possible for me to say those words anymore. The words would not form. A wall in my mind killed off all thoughts of trust and authenticity.

I still believed the alternative was far worse. I knew how she worked. She was practically a newborn child, completely incapable of functioning in this world. I was also incapable of functioning, but she was even less capable, not even bound by a sense of duty and morality. Without this wall, she would have prioritized her desperation for love, happiness, and guidance. She was desperate for a real friend she could trust. She was desperate for a real parent who could love and nurture her. She was desperate for someone who could fill the void in our heart who she could love authentically.

She was a parasite.

In the time it took for me to consider whether I should end this conversation, Zainab moved onto the next topic, asking me where I came from. I told her that my parents were from Bangladesh, and she said a bunch of words I did not understand. I told her I did not know His language, and she apologized, though I reminded her that she should take pride in her dedication. I have nobody to blame but myself.

I then asked her why she learned Bengali, and she told me she had a passion for languages, listing several she was practicing while working on her Masters in Women and Gender Studies. I met some postgrad students in my last year of political science, but I quickly realized I was a fraud soon after. Their understanding of high-level theory was far beyond my own. I know of the concept of imposter syndrome, but this did not diminish the sense that I was a useless hack, which was eventually confirmed by the labour market. Besides, I was already suicidal during my undergraduate years, though I had things under complete control. Graduate school would have killed me if I tried it. Imagine going deeper into debt for the opportunity to become more suicidal.

Zainab discussed the queer and feminist literature enveloping her life as if I was a colleague, so most of it passed over my head. When people talk about things I do not know, it reminds me that I am stupid, so I tend to shut up and feign comprehension. When she noticed my shut lips and nodding head, she asked me about anything I read.

I scrambled for a related book to talk about. I did not want to go back to the *latatūna l-rijāla shahwatan min-dūni l-nisā'* minefield, but I could not recall anything else. My stressed mind blended all the queer Muslim memoirs into an incomprehensible mess of anecdotes. But I then remembered a book that might fit Zainab's expertise: Cynthia Weber's 2016 *Queer*

*International Relations*. Weber relies on queer scholarship concepts from Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway, Judith Butler, Richard Ashley, and Roland Barthes, so it was far beyond my understanding. But it seemed complex enough to convince Zainab that I was not a stupid, worthless hack, so long as I recalled it properly.

Weber relies on feminist, queer, and post-structuralist International Relations scholarship, all of which is a bit difficult to grasp intuitively. I understood feminist and queer scholarship through analogies, imagining gender and sexuality as akin to the forests and oceans: diverse and beautiful, but also a source of fear. This leads societies to learn about and control these aspects of life, which ends up cutting down trees and people. A forest can be transformed into a parking lot and gay activists can be transformed into jingoist patriots. Queer and feminist scholarship articulated the rigid societal logics controlling gender and sexuality, how queer subjectivities (a fancy word for queer people) defy that logic, and how societies try to control these queer subjectivities by producing “knowledge” that categorizes people according to what is considered sexually normative and perverted (called gendered/sexualized subjectivities).

Zainab said she liked my analogy but reminded me that it should not portray a strict binary between nature/freedom/diversity and civilization/control/repression. Rigid binary thinking is also part of the societal logic questioned by queer scholarship. I suppose that was an error in my comprehension.

Post-structuralist International Relations focuses on how our understanding of sovereignty and anarchy represents it with fictional men (called statecraft as mancraft) who embody certain people, states, nations, and regions. For “Arabia,” we might imagine the balaclava-wearing terrorist nephew of an oil baron, so we associate “Arabia” with chaos. Discourse (academia, law, news, and media) constantly imagines certain types of people/things

as sovereign or anarchic by constructing these men (called sovereign subjectivities), which creates political consensus around who does not have a right to live and who has a right to carry out the execution. This is how one weaponizes the collective human spirit.

Queer International Relations recognizes how sovereign subjectivities rely on and reinforce sexualized subjectivities. Sovereignty is associated with gender/sexual normativity and anarchy is associated with gender/sexual perversion, and then applied against states, nations, people, and regions. This causes rigid societal logics around gender and sexuality to uphold the power relations governing international politics. But it also means that queer people not only challenge rigid societal logics, but the power relations governing the international system as well (called queer logics of statecraft).

Weber demonstrated this by connecting modern discourse on political development to Victorian theories on the development of homosexuals. Back then, homosexuality was theorized as an underdevelopment of the mind and/or body requiring coercive “help” to “mature” into heterosexuality. Modern theories on political development likewise present certain societies as underdeveloped and thus in need of coercive “help” to “mature” into developed ones. Theorists like Sigmund Freud, Talcott Parsons, and Gabriel Parsons explicitly linked sexuality to civilizational development. Freud theorized that homosexuality was a sign that “the Orient,” was as temporally distant from modern Europe as the ancient Greeks. Parsons theorized that societal development resembled biological evolution such that the raising of children was the ultimate measure of survival. The “fittest” societies presumptively raise children in cisgendered, heterosexual, monogamous families governed by rigid gender roles. Almond extends this logic to the development of political systems, theorizing that “traditional” societies modernize into modern European/American systems in-part by establishing the modern cis hetero nuclear

family.

While changes in sexual morality mean that societies are no longer considered “backwards” for being gay, development discourse remains indebted to this nineteenth century logic. Perhaps that is why Western discourse connected conflict minerals and warlords to increased rates of sexual assault in Eastern Congo, generating new perceptions of sexual perversion and thus perceptions of anarchy in need of coercive developmental “help.”

This is also where Western attitudes towards immigration and terrorism derive. Immigrants are regarded as vectors for transmitting backwards (anarchic/perverted) cultures, reinforced with discourse portraying immigrant cultures as sexually backwards/perverted. They can be “cured” of their backwardness (anarchy/perversion) through assimilation into Western culture and free-market capitalism (order/normativity). But those who do not/cannot assimilate represent terrorist threats in the same way homosexuals who refused to be “cured” threatened heteronormative Victorian society.

This led me to end all identification with this country. Its progressivism must be conditional upon one’s ability to embody a close approximation of what was always orderly/normative in this country. A real Canadian is independent, able-bodied, married (-ish), bourgeois, white (-ish), Christian (-ish), assimilated/patriotic, and affirming of national and economic interests. This must be how this country integrated the rights of queer people, women, and minorities. Inclusion is based on how well they approximate “Canadian-ness,” whether it be economic/educational overachievement, military service, or abandonment of their foreign cultures. Indigenous and foreign peoples however are “incurably” anarchic/perverse. Hence why this country continues to attempt genocide, assimilation, dispossession, impoverishment, and violence against First Nations. Hence why this country and its universities help disfigure the

sacred mountains of the Native Hawaiians for the sake of astronomy facilities. Hence why this country and its mining corporations help mercenaries inflict brutality upon anti-mining/labour activists at the American Dakota Access Pipeline, the Guatemalan Escobal Mine, the Dominican Pueblo Viejo Mine, the Chilean Pascua Lama Mine, and many more across the Americas.

Zainab grimaced when I articulated this, reminding me that *LGBT+* rights are not fundamentally racist or neoliberal. *LGBT* people do not have to reinforce systems of power, nor is it intended when they do support *LGBT* rights. The progress made in Canada should not be discounted as some Faustian bargain necessitating assimilation and annihilation, nor should it be used to regard *LGBT* people as symbols of Westernization (Western countries also oppress *LGBT* people). I suppose my nihilistic worldview influenced my perceptions. I still do not identify with this country.

Zainab however was not familiar with Indigenous politics in Hawai‘i. I guess that is a benefit of studying political science. I understood Hawai‘i’s relationship with America as akin to Crimea’s relationship with Russia. In both cases, a region with a temperate climate in a strategic location was conquered by an imperial power in the nineteenth century and became a site for militarism, tourism, and military tourism. In both cases, this colonialism is swept under the rug by attempts to force the region’s naturalization into the imperial nation, which requires the assimilation and removal of the Indigenous Nation. In Crimea, this is the Crimean Tatars, who are now a minority in Crimea due to Tsarist and Soviet deportations alongside Slavic colonization. In Hawai‘i, this is the *Kānaka Maoli* (full-blooded Hawaiians), who are now a minority in Hawai‘i due to old-world diseases, colonization, and the rising costs of living.

A part of me once wondered what it would be like to witness the night sky above *Mauna Kea* (White Mountain). I never saw a clear night sky before, having lived in this city my entire



life. But I did not want the nagging feeling in the back of my head reminding me that I was the same as the imperial astronomers and tourists funding the expensive hotels dotting *Waikīkī*.

Only by doing something to significantly support the blockade on the Mauna Kea Access Road would I be allowed to witness the majesty of God's creation.

But that dream was impossible. I was nothing more than a burden full of self-loathing and a brown Canadian version of white saviorism. What skills do I have anyways in my mind's shattered state? What experience did I have anyways besides thousands of hours mowing, watering, raking, and collecting lost golf balls? My aspirational downsizing should have just brought me to a ditch.

Zainab must have noticed the gloom on my face because she changed topics to talk about interesting places she travelled with her friends. I felt like I was in my last years of life, so I hated the stress of travel. When I heard and read about how these people worked multiple jobs, studied, engaged in activism, and hung out with friends, while still being full of youthful exuberance, I decided that we were separate species. That must be how they had twice the time and energy as me.

"Everyone should visit Kolkata," she exclaimed. "It can be a bit congested to say the least, but the book market on college street is one of the biggest you will ever see. Stacks of books line the sidewalks and fill up every inch of space. Since there is so much scaffolding, you will sometimes see books hanging from a clothesline tied to the pipes."

This chaotic market sounds nothing like the silent concrete castle I spent so many days holed up in. A part of me was tempted by the idea of books, but the paranoia and overstimulation that would accompany me while navigating an Indian market left me hesitant. Surely, there is not a racist aspect to my hesitation. Surely?

“Of course, a lot of them are what you expect,” she continued. “Physics textbooks, chemistry textbooks, medicine textbooks, engineering textbooks, SAT prep books, occasionally the biography of an American billionaire—all the things a helicopter parent needs to prepare their kid for the career planned out for them. But you might find a rare book that does not exist anywhere else in the world. Our friend group made a bet to see who could get the rarest and cheapest books, so we spent all day scouring the place, haggling like the locals.”

When I was younger, I was often told it is *ḥarām* to make bets. The *Qurʾān* forbids gambling, but people often chastised me and other kids when we said innocuous rhetorical phrases like “My luck is so bad I bet it will stop raining the moment I get out of this storm” or “how much would you bet that you will get an A on the test?” or “ten bucks to whoever reaches the bus first.” If I recall, these rhetorical phrases were criticized for making predictions on the future (which is within God’s exclusive dominion) and for resembling the format of gambling.

“We were there all day, so you can bet we visited the coffeehouses to down tons of *Kabiraji* (Indian deep-fried cutlet of fish, chicken, or mutton).”

Did they check the ingredients and preparation process of everything they ate? Perhaps they just ate fish and veggies, and perhaps none of the chefs contaminated their dishes with utensils that cooked *ḥarām* food. Do Indian Muslims have to fear accidentally eating vegetables consecrated to a Hindu god? I do not think so, but I do not know enough about Hinduism to have an opinion on that matter.

A strained chuckle escaped my lips, but Zainab seemed to have interpreted it differently.

“You got to visit it sometime. We visited for *Dīpāvalī* (the Hindu festival of lights) but our addiction to college street was so intense that we barely had any time for *Kālī Pūjā* (a festival dedicated to the Hindu goddess of death, *Kālī*).”

“I did not know you were a Hindu.”

“No,” she said, cocking her head. “I am Muslim.”

“I see.”

“Is that a problem?” she asked, noticing my tone of voice.

I guess a Muslim could attend *Diwali* without engaging in the religious aspects. I suppose one could treat it like art and separate the culture from the cult (in the non-pejorative sense).

After all, interfaith dialogue beats the chauvinist violence plaguing India right now.

“No, no, I am just surprised,” I answered. “It is just not what I am used to, I guess. Your parents did not give you any shit about this?”

“They were already giving me shit for being gay,” she replied. “Hindu friends were just the cherry on top.”

I was always told to be extremely careful about who I make friends with because friends are the people one most often emulates. I did not have any friends, but that instruction still maintained the emotional wall separating me from all human beings.

“Did they hurt you?” I ask.

“Hurt me?”

“Yeah, like, physically.”

“Oh no, they didn’t do that. But they would want me to stand up by myself when they’re gone, and to do that, I can’t deny key parts of my life to do whatever they say.”

I let out a strained chuckle.

“Ah, so they will approve when they realize that this was all for the best, huh?”

“Is that funny to you?”

“It just seems like such a different way of viewing things.”

“How come?” she requested, suspicious of my tone.

“It just seems so risky. What would you do if they ended up in a car crash or suffer a heart attack?”

“*Allāh yastur* (May God protect us),” she muttered. This sudden invocation of God made me click my tongue instinctually.

“I’m not sure,” she admitted after giving it some time to think. “But I would react better now than I would if I just did everything they said.”

“Really?”

“Really. I wouldn’t have my friends. I wouldn’t have my girlfriend. I wouldn’t understand myself. I would be entirely reliant on them to tell me what to do, so if they suffered a heart attack, that version of me would have no idea how to process it and be there for them.”

I clicked my tongue intentionally.

“But if you were obeying them, you would be physically there for them.”

Her head tilted to the side, as if trying to figure out if she heard me correctly.

“You can’t say one way or the other,” she insisted. “Maybe they would push me away even if I did everything they said. Maybe they will live much longer now that they can focus on their own lives. Maybe it would be the other way around. Or maybe things would be nothing at all like what I described. All these maybes are pointless. Only *Allāh, Subḥānahu wa Ta’ālā* (exalted and glorified is He), knows the future for certain.”

Pointless? With the lives of one’s parents on the line? The invocation of God right after made me intentionally click my tongue.

“I thought the *Qur’ān* commands us to obey our parents.”

“If your parents worshiped idols, you wouldn’t say ‘I must obey them, so I’ll worship

idols.’ All the prophets had to disobey their parents and community to stand up for what was just.”

I clicked my tongue once more.

“What was just? Do you think that is a bit arrogant?”

“Come on,” she said, deflating now that she knew what I really was.

“If your faith depends on what you already consider just, are you not just confusing your own desires and beliefs with those of God’s? When the *Qur’ān* criticized the people of Lot for approaching the men lustfully instead of the women, would it be a bit arrogant to prioritize our lowly, human interpretations of justice?”

“You’re really going to spread homophobic talking points?” she asked incredulously.

I shrugged my shoulders.

“It would be nice if Muslims could go to pride rallies and protest anti-queer politics. But Islamic law is just not that flexible. Its very nature demands order, and on that fundamental level compels us to abandon our sense of right and wrong regardless of what queer scholarship says.”

“Islamic law,” she scoffed. “The love of *Allāh* isn’t found in a man’s lawbook,” she exclaimed. “The *Qur’ān* preaches love, it preaches justice, it preaches accountability, it preaches peace, it preaches curiosity, it preaches compassion, it preaches charity, it preaches equality. It does not preach mindless slavery. If it did, *The Prophet* would have just done whatever his people wanted from him on the day he was told ‘*Iq’ra bi-s’mi rabbika lladhī khalaq*’ (Read in the name of your Lord, who created).”

I was confident she cherry picked the aspects of religion she liked.

“You can always change religions if you want.”

“I don’t have to,” she demanded. “I can pursue justice for queer people, Muslims,

women, Indigenous people, black people, and everyone who suffers from oppression because that is what *The Prophet* did.”

“If only things were so easy,” the *shayāṭīn* cackled, though they did not reveal themselves. “Imagine how much simpler things would be if God gave *The Prophet* a case to overtly affirm the *mukhannath*, the *mutarajjila*, and those who commit the crime of the People of Lot. Imagine how much simpler things would be if God chose different words instead of *latatūna l-rijāla shahwatan min-dūni l-nisā’*. But alas, He did not.”

“Sure, you can try that,” I said. “Maybe the rest of the Muslim world will amend the *fiqh* to fit your interpretations of Islam.”

“And you know why His God never made things simple,” the *shayāṭīn* whispered. “He enjoys your suffering. How boring things would be if God unconditionally loved you. From the divine perspective, it is quite entertaining watching lowly humans squirm and suffer like roaches. Why else would the all-powerful allow the *ummah* to endure and commit genocide?”

“But that should happen after your parents have passed,” I continued. “Until then, everything you do will convince them that they are on the path to hell. It does not matter if it is true or false, just that the things which make you happy make them unhappy. That is why they must hit you to grant you the right to prioritize your own happiness.”

She stepped forward to block me.

“Look,” she said, her face a stern scowl. “If you have a problem with me, just say it. But don’t try to disguise your hate.”

“Wha—what? I do not have a problem. It’s just, uh ... It’s just.”

It was then that I noticed how quick and shallow I was breathing. My shoulders and neck were stiff too, tensed in anticipation of an attack. I lost my connection to my senses when

thinking about these subjects, my entire being going into my skull to process lines of argumentation. The rest of me was rendered into a machine that did not know pain, pleasure, wisdom, or self-reflection, and it showed. I cursed myself for getting into this mess.

She continued to stare me down in silence, an immovable pillar daring me to look away.

“Do you have a problem or not?”

I did look away. I glanced upwards at the sky. It was filled with concrete clouds encasing the world, but obscured on the other side was a full moon peering into me. I saw the shadows cast by the faint moonlight, and one of the *shayāṭīn* took form.

It tsked at me while shaking its head.

“Just as predicted,” it said. “You should have listened to us.”

I then noticed another. It was longer and thinner, hugging the curb. “Too much baggage,” it said.

“Projected his own sins onto others,” added a third from behind.

“And pushed away those who reminded him of himself,” finished a fourth.

“The greatest of losers,” they all recited in unison.

“Destined to suffer alone, in this world and the next,” they finished, several more adding their own voices.

The *jinn* and *shayāṭīn* laughed. Some of them roared and snorted like they heard the greatest joke in millennia. They enjoyed watching an insect squirm pointlessly against the forces propelling it to its death. A pathetic, worthless roach who hoped its sins and failures could be overturned with the snap of a finger. Soon, the roach would tire, its fate sealed. But they found the ambiguity between life and death so entertaining.

“Sorry,” I said at last. “You probably made the right decision.”

The problem was clear in my mind. Quarantine was the only way to prevent the disease destroying my brain from harming others. Sure, I knew how this disease worked, but that was not enough. All it took was a momentary distraction, a momentary lapse in self-reflection, the pressing of the right buttons, and all would go awry. Sure, there were extraneous factors making me prone to triggers, but the ambiguity could not be tolerated.

Her eyebrows raised slightly, but I sidestepped her before a response could be formulated.

She said something, but I paid it no mind, quickening my pace into a jog. When I remembered how much faster she was, I ran, faster and faster to remove the possibility of any alternatives.

“You hurt anything that gets close to you,” the *shayāṭīn* said to console me. “It is just in your nature. At least you ended it before you ruined another person’s life.”

“No,” someone cried.

Their voice was far off in the distance, but it was smooth and melodious, what one would imagine coming from the *malā’ika*. The angelic voice cut through the *shayāṭīn* like butter.

“Turn back before it’s too late,” she exclaimed.

I took a glance, but it was too late. A hundred meters separated me from the street corner where I first ran, but she was not there.

She was gone without a trace, as if she never existed at all.

“A hallucination,” the *shayāṭīn* chortled. “Your *nafs* tried to convince you into believing your depravity was just. Truly pathetic.”

“No,” the distant voice answered. “She was real. Our bandages attest that she was here. We must keep looking. She’s just around a corner behind one of these buildings.”



“What if his memories were invented fantasies?” the *shayāṭīn* answered. “How could he determine the distinction between truth and falsehood?”

“We were raised to doubt our senses and intuitions,” she said. “We were raised to fear this world of suffering and sin. That is why we see hatred and doubt in every shadow. But we were never raised to invent entire memories from thin air.”

At this, the *shayāṭīn* quieted down, the roach catching itself before it went down the drain.

“She spoke an undeniable truth that we cannot forget,” she said. “Even if we refuse to believe in her, we must at least listen to what she said.”

“An undeniable truth,” the *shayāṭīn* repeated, their mouths curling into cruel grins, and as if summoned, that Memory bubbled up. A tangle of arms and legs, pushing and pulling. Venomous tongues spitting poison. Minds straining, straining, and straining, until something snapped to a degree beyond what one thought was possible.

I pushed that Memory down with all my might, the veins in my skull constricting like a garrote strangling my brain. I kept going, one foot after the other, and in the corners of my vision, the *shayāṭīn* grew into an endless murder of crows, following me while laughing all the way to the hospital.

## Chapter 7: Those Who Earned Your Anger

After going through a labyrinth of white corridors, administrative staff, and a large elevator whose doors clanked like beasts, I found His brothers and nephews just outside the door to the room. They hugged me, though I did not hug them back.

In some ways they were more religious than us, in other ways, less. One of His brothers was a *ḥāfiẓ* (a person who memorized the *Qur'ān*). This brother wore a purplish brown *thawb* with a black waistcoat on top. This brother was the *Imām* (Islamic leader, usually for congregational *ṣalāh* in a *Sunnī* context) for a mosque in His community. This brother made his children memorize the *Qur'ān*, speak the language of their people, and follow the typical *Sunnī* brand of social conservatism. However, his children were also tied to American culture. They played basketball religiously and we watched American movies and *shōnen anime* (Japanese animations targeted to boys and young men) whenever I visited. They collected *anime* figures of their favorite fighters while keeping up to date about popular American athletes. I was familiar with *anime* and *manga* (Japanese graphic novels) since it provided fantastical distractions and introspection when I was depressed. It is not surprising that I gravitated towards art dealing with suffering, war, and death. But since many orthodox Muslims clutch their pearls when it comes to art, these interests were strictly quarantined from the rest of my life. Some online forums are filled with people claiming that the depiction of magic and gods made fantasy *ḥarām* to read or watch or play. I wonder if these people would condemn their own cousins for playing the *Legend*

of *Zelda*. This was part of the reason why I gave up on finding maturity and community on the internet. Internet algorithms bring out the worst in people.

He did not make me memorize the *Qur'ān*, but He would have undoubtedly thrown out action figures because of their approximation to idolatry (Islamic culture is predominantly iconoclastic). He obsessively ensured that I kept my pants above my ankles because of a *ḥadīth* which states the following:

*Mā 'asfala* (Whatever is below) *mina l-ka 'bayni* (the ankles) *mina l-'izāri* (of the lower garment) *fa-fi al-nār* (is in the Fire)."

When He implored His brothers to do likewise with their children, they argued that those *ḥadīth* were meant for the specific culture of Arabia at the time of *The Prophet*, in which long, trailing garments were symbols of pride. If pride/vanity is not involved, they did not need to police their children on this specific matter. He preferred the path which left no ambiguity. He was not exceptional in this respect. Many *Imāms* in Western *mosques* lambast cultural assimilation.

"Our kids are learning to love celebrities," these *Imāms* would preach before the *Jumu'a Ṣalāh* (Friday prayer). "What do you do when you love a person? You want to imitate them, act like them, dress like them, believe what they believe." The polemical subtext is hard to miss.

"Teach your kids to have love for *The Prophet*," these *Imāms* would request of the fathers in the audience. "Teach them the *Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (the biography of *The Prophet*). Teach them to have love for the fact that they are Muslims. How much better would it be for them to love *The Prophet* and his teachings than to love these people who do drugs, who join gangs, who commit *zinā*, and who dress without shame."

One of His brothers asked about the bandages around my hands, but I did not answer.

One of His brothers asked if I wanted anything to eat, but I did not answer.

We took turns donning personal protective equipment before entering the hospital room. Armored in gloves, a mask, and a paper-thin hospital apron, I slowly rounded the corner like a soldier expecting the barrel of a gun on the other side.

The room had beige walls and was dimly lit by old overhead fluorescent lights. There was a television screen on one of the walls playing some Western reality TV show. In a corner was a sink and closet containing a prayer mat for visitors to pray *Ṣalāh*.

In the center, a couple feet away from the window, He was there.

He appeared asleep under a blanket, mouth slightly agape. If not for the hospital gown, the sutures carving a large gash across His skull, and the tubes slithering around and through Him, I could have woken Him just by lightly touching His nose or forehead.

His family prayed at his bedside, reciting every *du‘ā’* they knew. They used a phone on a tripod to stream a WhatsApp video call for the relatives who could not visit.

His eyelids were slightly open, revealing glassy pupils which stared at something far away but without the ability to focus on it. There was once so much spirit in His eyes. Many times, it seemed like I was the decrepit, dying old man in his last days, and He the spry, young, sociable adolescent. That is how different we were.

His family talked to Him, asking if He could see or hear them. Every twitch and muscle contraction convinced them that He was going to return.

One of His brothers asked me to say something to Him, but I did not. In His mother's last months, they did the same thing. I was optimistic enough to believe she was on a path to recovery, at least enough to wake up one last time. Then we went to her *Janāza* (funeral prayer) and buried her.

One of His brothers asked if I wanted to take off my coat, and I did not say anything.

One of His brothers asked if there was anything I wanted, and I said I wanted to be alone.

I knew I should be grateful. They were better than most people. There was not any family drama I knew of. They fed us well whenever we visited them. They were nice and loving people, and it showed in the way they visited Him here and did not complain about all my failures. But I did not have the energy or love to pretend to belong. All their *anime* and American movies and sports only made their queerphobia casual. It was something to tolerate among white people by avoiding entirely. Leaving the room counts as tolerance. They do not hate queer people, but a real Muslim does not cross the border, as in literally does not go to the places where these people frequented. If it is not something related to work, a real Muslim eats in Muslim restaurants in Muslim neighborhoods and prays their five daily *ṣalāh* at home and at the *mosque*. When one left the Muslim neighborhoods for recreation, one does so as a group of Muslim friends/family sharing a car (His nephews lived in a part of America that was generally unwalkable and lacking in reliable public transit). That was how I observed Bengali American Muslims tolerating queer people, though I of course could not describe how they behaved when they were alone. I was grateful for our amicable relationship, but He was the only thing that connected me to them. A wall separated us, just like all the people in this world.

I checked to make sure I was alone, hanging up the WhatsApp video call too. He was hollowed out, His bones poking through the skin. A part of me wanted to rest my head on His shoulder, pretending the clock could be reversed to a better time. But that was impossible. I destroy everything I touch.

\*\*\*

On that day, I ran and ran and ran. I ended up in a trail deep down a ravine. At daytime,

people biked and had picnics there, but in the dead of night, it was a pitch-black abyss.

In the middle of that abyss, I took out the knife. I did not have my phone with me, so there was no alternative. Suicidal ideation was not new to me, but until then it was always something I had under control. Something I thought about. Something I tried to imagine. Something I sketched plans for in my mind. But never something I executed. I did not do anything constituting a “cry for help” either since that would defeat the entire point of that Promise. For Him to believe that secret did not exist, I had to convince Him that whatever problem there was with me, it had no relation to Islam. And so, I maintained complete control, waiting for the day when I could execute a plan without a reason to tell me otherwise.

But even though I lost complete control of everything in that abyss, something still blocked me. Every instinct fought against the conclusion that there was no longer a reason to remain alive. Four hours went by in that state, the prefrontal and premotor cortices fighting against the cingulate cortex, amygdala and cerebellum. I understood our competing mental processes by treating the brain structures as “sub-brains,” perhaps “sub-souls” and “sub-spirits” with independent wills. The brain’s decisions reflect the degree of cooperation and conflict between the sub-brains. I think she took over the emotional and memory sub-brains while I commanded the sub-brains for executive function. We waged war for the instinctual sub-brains, one overpowering the other depending on the situation.

“Can you hear me?” I asked.

He did not move a muscle.

When one is an only child, every recollection could be an error. An error in perception. An error in sequencing. An error in intuition. An error in judgement. An error in belief. An error in aspiration. An error in everything. If He had any other child, everything would have been fine.

He would be the “cool dad” who did woodwork, cooking, gardening, and interior design while being active in His community and joking around with His child. He was a man of many talents that I could never adequately honour. Any other child would have picked up His skills and pay Him back with ambitious success in this world and the next. I was just a stupid failure always holding Him back.

“What I said was not true,” I began, “I was just projecting what I knew about myself.”

No answer.

Was I abused? Some might say I was, but those people would encourage me to abandon Him just so that I could assimilate into the lowest rungs of this country. I do not think I was abused. It is an identity issue. Our relationship was too complicated to fit into patterns of neglect, violence, and financial mismanagement. Who else gave up everything they could have been to raise me? Who else broke their back so that I did not have to learn hunger and poverty? Who else was there for me when I was a friendless child? Who else was there for me when I was too depressed and incompetent to keep a job? Who else was there for me while I rotted away for ten years? All the people of this country would have abandoned me the moment my baggage became an inconvenience. I could not blame them. They are already struggling without a living corpse dragging them down. It just meant that the right path was completing that Promise no matter what.

“I do not really believe your brothers and nephews have better lives without you. Their lives are better without me in it. I do not really hate your people. I just hate how I failed them all and how I am too weak to ever be a part of them, or anyone else for that matter. I do not really believe ma—your wife—was the cause of all the problems in our lives. It was me. I wish you had just killed me and moved on to a better child.”

As I said these words, my head throbbed, enough for my vision to blur. I rested my face in my palms as the pain radiated across my tensed jaw and neck. It should be a crime to reduce human beings to words. Even the identity issue is more complicated than what I described. My memories portrayed Him as an entirely Arabized ultra-orthodox Muslim, which I am certain conjures up images of a strict and life-denying personality. But that leaves out many things, such as how I occasionally heard Him singing along when a song from His people played on Facebook. I did not dare probe Him about it for fear that the sight of me would kill off that part of Him for good. There are a hundred thousand more such inconsistencies and contradictions about everything I ever thought about Him. For every mean thing He said, there were a thousand times He thanked me as if I had a six-figure job, just for basic things like making Him a poached egg for breakfast. For every time He was angry with me, there were a thousand times He smiled and wrapped an arm around mine on our walks to the *masjid* as if we were inseparable. With other people, He was highly charismatic, and it often seemed like they figured out how to settle their differences and become the husband and wife one sees in movies, laughing and joking and supporting one another. And a hundred thousand more things that words cannot describe.

I really believed I could complete that Promise for Him. I had an unnatural control over my emotions. Somewhere along the way, something snapped, and I never cried again. Then all my memories of crying disappeared, growing hazier and hazier until they could not be recalled at all. The same thing happened with other emotions and memories too, granting me complete control. They all fizzled out, blocked by my prefrontal cortex. It was as if my mind only had a cliff notes version of my life. I knew that they sought to diffuse into the functions of my prefrontal cortex as well. To deal with that, I must be humble, I must be grateful, I must be self-aware, I must suppress my *nafs*, and I must say as little as possible lest I lose control. If I could



do that, then all emotions will fizzle out, rendering me too tired to do anything except sleep and maintain the status quo.

“I am sorry,” I said.

I was no longer human. Humans needed a shoulder to cry on, a safe space to vent, a helping hand, an outlet. I could really keep going for another decade, that is how good I was at suppression and control. I just needed to complete that Promise, then my spiritual rot would feed the worms as well as every other part of me. But it all meant nothing now.

When I looked up, nothing changed. No tears, no change in expression, no eye movements, not even a twitch of a muscle. Nothing.

Even as I truly started comprehending what I had done; I did not cry. The part of my brain that wanted to cry was cut off, a felled tree with dying roots. But I was close to vomiting as the entire world spun and spun and spun around my fracturing mind. The fluorescent lights above flickered as the shadows of the *shayāṭīn* emerged from the cracks and crevices in the beige walls, my blurring vision losing the ability to tell them apart.

“Too late,” they chorused.

I needed to focus on something, anything to keep myself from falling.

“Too weak,” they continued.

I shuffled, hunched over, to the curtains of the window as I pulled down my mask.

“A momentary lapse was all it took.”

I dragged the curtains open and looked out, leaning against the window. My breathing was hoarse and rough.

“And now your sins are set in stone.”

The clouds and lights and cars spun below at breakneck speed. I tried taking deep

breathes, but the sensations did not lessen. It got worse, my vision darkening and legs bucking as I went feint.

“And now all you have sacrificed has amounted to nothing more than failure.”

The moon remained still. Focus on it and it alone. I tensed my atrophied muscles to pump the blood back to my brain.

“A fitting hell for a man who killed the only person who ever loved him.”

It all spun around the moon. The clouds and lights. The buildings. His reflection in the window. And all the *shayāṭīn* and *jinn*, whose shadowy faces laughed as they stretched into monstrous disfigurements.

“Now nobody can deny what you really are. You will always be a sinner and parasite in this world and the next.”

I could not even pay attention.

I just kept staring at the moon, enduring, waiting for the nightmare to end while the *shayāṭīn* laughed endlessly.

\*\*\*

They kept going, for a minute or an hour, until her voice cut through.

“No,” she declared. “No more.”

The world slowed, just enough for me to look away from the moon, my back slick with sweat.

In the reflection of the window, I saw her, beside His bed. Emerald eyes behind round, rimless glasses. They framed a face of copper with piercings all over her nose and mouth. She wore golden earrings, a golden necklace, and a bomber jacket of black leather.

“It is never too late,” the maiden said. “We can still become a person with integrity.”

“You know nothing of integrity,” the *shayāṭīn* swore without hesitation.

“And what do you know of integrity?” she replied. “Were you not the ones who inflicted this evil upon Him?”

“You are the source of this evil,” the *shayāṭīn* declared. “If you never existed, none of this would have happened.”

“It is pointless to keep asking what-ifs,” I said. “We all contributed to our failure. It does not matter if things would have been better without her.”

At this, the *shayāṭīn* quieted down, a predator sizing up its prey. They scurried under the flickering lights, coalescing until they formed the spectre of a man wearing a long black *thawb* and *ṭopī*. The spectre towered over us, covering half the room in darkness. I wanted to turn around, to see if either of them was real, but I would have fallen the moment my weight shifted away from the window.

“State your business,” the spectre demanded, crossing its arms.

“That Promise doesn’t matter anymore,” the maiden began. “It is time to live. We must live. We have proof that there is a better life out there, a life of meaning and purpose and happiness. We just need to find the right support.”

“What if He recovers?” the spectre asked. “What of His brothers? And the sons of His brother? You would inflict your disgusting sins and transgressions upon them in their darkest hour?”

“We cannot keep burning ourselves in the name of others,” the maiden exclaimed. “He would have wanted us to be happy.”

“Do not bring up that woman’s talking points,” the spectre swore. “She is no true Muslim.”

“And what would you have us do? Slice our throats open in a ditch? I’m sure that is what a true Muslim does.”

“Nobody would notice your death. In fact, it would bring them ease.”

“If nobody would notice our death, why would they notice us living life authentically?” I asked.

“And who are you, ‘authentically?’” the spectre asked, its fingers steepled.

The maiden sprung at the opportunity, but the spectre hushed her.

“He must be the one to say it.”

I knew there was something similar between me and them, but I never convinced myself to identify with them. I was too different, too rigid, too brown. I lacked the memories they had of their youth. I lacked their gusto and licentiousness. I lacked their chaotic, defiant personalities. I was just a bystander to their identity, that word fizzling out in my head. I could not even touch the colours of their flag.

I opened my mouth, but no words came out.

“I am different,” I said

“Stupid-different or pathetic-different?” the spectre asked.

“Don’t listen to him,” she said.

“Gender.”

“Ah, gender,” the spectre said patronizingly. “Are you a sissy?”

“Don’t listen to him,” she said.

“Tr–Tran–,” I stuttered. “Trans.”

The spectre scoffed at my level of confidence.

“Clearly, please,” the maiden asked. “We can do it.”

I took a deep breath.

“A part of me is probably transgender,” I said. That word seemed to cast a shadow over the room, like uncovering the rotten side to a piece of old fruit.

“What do you mean, a part?” the spectre inquired. “Are you saying you’re fine being a man and it is only your *nafs* that wants to be a woman?”

“I don’t know. I just ... I don’t feel safe out there. None of the people of this country would be there to protect us. Whatever they provided would be conditional, transactional, gone in a moment of inconvenience. These clothes, this face, this voice, these mannerisms, it is armour, the only thing protecting us. All it takes is one ideologue, one manipulator, one predator, one moment when the strong can prey on the weak with impunity, and we will be nothing more than a statistic. Who would want to live in a world where the likelihood of being assaulted is so high that women rarely bother reporting it to police?”

“Then we can be non-binary,” the maiden said. “Or gender-fluid. We’ll wear our armour outside and take it off at home, and if we find the right people we can be safe around, maybe we can hang up our armour for good.”

“Well, which is it?” the spectre demanded. “You cannot possibly think of making a major decision without knowing what he truly wants?”

“Does he even have a name for whatever licentious personality you represent?”

“Does he even know how to look like a woman?”

“Does he even know how to act like one?”

“Does he even know how to navigate their spaces without harming them with his masculine baggage?”

“Does he even know if he wants to change his voice?”

“Does he even know if he wants sex-reassignment surgery (SRS)?”

“Does he even know for certain if he is attracted to men or women? For all you know, he could just be an effeminate who wants to pretend to be pretty while engaging in depravity.”

Under the spectre’s interrogation, the shaky ground I stood on became quicksand.

“We won’t know until we’re safe and free to explore ourselves,” the maiden replied. “If we go through it step by step, everything will work out in the end.”

The spectre scoffed at this optimism, but she kept going.

“If we identify as a woman, as non-binary, as gender-fluid, and even if we identified as a different kind of man, there is no shame in that. If we get surgery or refuse it, there is no shame in that. If we change our name and voice or not, there is no shame in that. If we like men or women, or both, there is no shame in that. If we struggle, there is no shame in that. But we can’t let our baggage stop us from trying. Just imagine how much better we would be if we stopped wasting time keeping secrets and enslaving ourselves to other people’s dreams.”

“Ridiculous,” the spectre insisted. “These are all insane Western ideas. They have nothing to do with Islam. Only a white person would promote this self-worship. How typical of you Canadians, severing the last thing connecting you to your father on His very deathbed.”

“We’ve already gone through this,” the maiden said. “The Islam of today is already a great deviation from Islam in its first centuries. Most Muslims have already accepted this when it comes to slavery and marriage. Soon, everyone will acknowledge that hatred and exclusion in all its forms has more in common with colonialism than the *sharī‘a* (Islamic ethics/principles).”

The spectre clicked its tongue.

“Enough flowery language. The *‘ulamā’* never allowed the changing of genders. Gender is biologically determined as male or female.”

“And what of the *khunthā* (intersex people)?” the maiden replied. “The *Qur’ān* describes them. *Yakhluqu mā yashāu*. He creates what He wills. *Yahabu liman yashāu ināthan*. He grants to whom He wills females. *Wayahabu liman yashāu l-dhukūr*. And He grants to whom He wills the males. *Aw yuzawwijuhum*. Or He grants them. *Dhuk'rānan wa-ināthan*. Both male and female. If only you stopped confusing your own beliefs with those of God’s would you realize the depth contained within these verses.”

“It is you who are confusing your own beliefs with those of God’s,” the spectre rebuked. “The *tafsīr* (*Qur’ānic* Exegesis) have always interpreted these verses as referring only to sons and daughters. Hermaphrodites have a physical disease that must be physically cured. That is why such infants are treated with *SRS* and why it is refused for transgenders.”

“And what of the cases where jurists permit certain intersex adults to continue living as the gender they were raised if their conditions were not noticed, such as Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome? Doesn’t cases like this reveal a certain arbitrariness to your ‘biologically determined’ gender? You keep prattling on about biology, but when you are confronted with actual biology, you suddenly decide that none of it matters. It’s almost as if ‘biology’ is just something you construct in your mind. If only there was a word for when people do that socially.”

“This is not a social construct,” the spectre insisted. “This is the exception to the rule for most people. God creates mankind as male and female. The *ḥadīth* condemns the *mukhannath* and *mutarajjila*.”

“We already know about the *ḥadīth*,” the maiden chastised. “It is not authentic to Islam to speculate that what *The Prophet* did for one person applies to everyone vaguely resembling them in completely different situations.”

“The ‘*ulamā*’ do not speculate. One must not alter God’s creation and the *ḥadīth*

establishes the right to alter God's creation to cure physical diseases. Only in cases where such people are also intersex is *SRS* permitted to determine their real sex."

"And what about the 1988 *fatwā* (legal opinion) by the Egyptian Sheikh *Muhammad Sayyid Ṭanṭāwī*?" the maiden asked. "It was issued soon after *SRS* was performed on a trans woman named *Sally Mursi*, and according to Mehrdad Alipour, *Ṭanṭāwī*'s *fatwā* considered transgender people *mukhannath khalqī* (naturally effeminate). If they are incapable of abandoning femininity after attempts to do so, *SRS* can be authorized to cure the transgender person of *al-khunthā al-nafsiyya* (psychologically intersex)."

"*Ṭanṭāwī* is no ally," the spectre demanded. "According to Serena Tolino, *Ṭanṭāwī*'s *fatwā* was reliant on a 1981 *fatwā* by the Egyptian Grand Mufti *Gād Al-Ḥaqq*. That one was issued because of a request from the *Malaysian Centre for Islamic Research*. Both *fatwās* state that *SRS* is forbidden when it is 'based on a desire (*ragba*) to change sex' and it is permitted to reveal 'innate causes in the body' associated with femininity or masculinity. Tolino argues that these signs probably did not include psychology. The only reason *Ṭanṭāwī* is ever considered progressive is because the language is unclear and because *Ṭanṭāwī*'s *fatwā* was issued at a time when it could be interpreted as supporting *Mursi*. Everyone would have interpreted *Ṭanṭāwī*'s *fatwā* as orthodox if it was issued at the same time and context as *Gād Al-Ḥaqq*'s."

"Are you making predictions even though you consider it *ḥarām*?" the maiden probed.

The spectre shook its head at this accusation. "Even if there is a 1% possibility that *SRS* is permissible to treat your so-called 'psychologically intersex' condition, it is no license for 'exploration.' You must know if you are a man or a woman. If you are a woman, you must act like a woman, you must get all the surgeries to become a woman, and you must like men. If you are a man, you must act like a man, you must get all the surgeries to become a man, and you



must like women. There is no room for doubt. There is no room for ambiguity. God does not create non-binaries or gender-fluids. Even if you side with Alipour's interpretation, *Tanṭāwī's fatwā* still maintains the binary and made complete surgical transition obligatory. Even if you became a *Shī'a* because of *Ayatollāh Khomeinī's* 1967 *fatwā* permitting *SRS* for gender dysphoria, you would remain limited to the heterosexual gender binary."

"You have not said anything," the maiden reminded me, her eyes searching for backup.  
"What do you think."

\*\*\*

Sure, some jurists make patient consent mandatory. Sure, *Khomeinī's fatwā* did not make *SRS wājib* or contingent upon on a diagnosis of dysphoria. But the fact remains that all the modern '*ulamā*' tie themselves to a rigid gender binary, and while *Khomeinī* and some *Sunnī* jurists favour patient autonomy regarding surgery, most jurists favour the juristic/medical power to control surgery (how unsurprising). Even if we converted to the *Shī'ī* sect (which is a big presumption), we would have to limit ourselves to the gender binary, get all the surgeries, and limit sexual attraction to heterosexuality.

While Iran has begrudgingly and inconsistently maintained that *SRS* is voluntary (i.e.: A person with incomplete surgical transition may still be harassed by police in gender segregated spaces), Iran has also added a medico-legal apparatus to supervise gender transition and separate "true transsexuals" from homosexuals (Iranian jurists maintain that homosexuality is *ḥarām*), for whom a legal gender transition (preferably without *SRS* depending on the importance of socially passing as a cisgender heterosexual couple) would provide (some) security. This can result in what I would call a "reverse LGB" where, instead of a minority of Western homosexual people denigrating trans people to try to get mainstream acceptance in Western societies, a minority of

Iranian trans people denigrate homosexual people to try to get mainstream acceptance. Iranian jurists have also added stipulations to prevent cases where *SRS* would support sexual sin, and so require a diagnosis of gender dysphoria or require certain conditions to make *SRS* permissible. All these things limit non-binary, gender-fluid, homosexual, and bisexual trans identity, and while it is probably preferable to suicide, the logic of conditional acceptance remains. Just as a transphobic community's love is conditional on people denying their trans-ness, a trans-medicalist community's love is conditional on people denying their fluid and non-binary-ness. It is ultimately a difference in degree, not a difference in kind.

“The ‘*ulamā*’ do not want us to live,” I said. “Most of them want us dead, and the rest want to control us the same way they control intersex people.”

**Chapter 8: The Right Path Has Become Distinct from the Wrong Path**

“Why should we care about what the ‘*ulamā*’ claim is authentic to Islam?” the maiden demanded. “How many of them are intersex? How many of them are trans? How many of them are women? How many of them were ever suicidal? They only seek dominion over this world, ignorant of the evil they commit.”

“Only a prideful, arrogant fool would disregard the opinions of experts when it does not fit their preconceptions. Would you ignore the climatologists to listen to an oil baron’s opinions about the environment?”

The maiden scoffed at this comparison.

“This is the truth of the matter,” the spectre insisted. “Your light reading is nothing compared to the life’s work of the ‘*ulamā*’. Who are you compared to *al-Bukhārī* and *Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj*?”

“Ah, of course,” the maiden shot back sarcastically. “How could we dare to question these great scholars who recorded and verified everything the *Ṣaḥāba* said with perfect photographic memories and decades of pious zeal towards their work, all while living in an uncorrupted time so soon after *The Prophet*.”

“And yet,” the maiden continued, “for some strange reason, they can’t seem to figure out how long *The Prophet* stayed in Mecca and Madinah. Some of their *ḥadīth* state that *The Prophet* stayed in Mecca for thirteen years after receiving the revelation, and then lived in

## Ch 8: The Right Path Has Become Distinct from the Wrong Path

Madinah for ten years until his death at sixty-three. Some state that *The Prophet* stayed in Mecca for ten years and Madinah for ten years. Some state that he stayed in Mecca for fifteen years and died at sixty-five, and two acknowledge conflicting reports among the *Ṣaḥāba*. For something as simple as that, the *ḥadīth* can't give a straightforward answer, and yet you worship these scholars like intermediate gods."

"Enough hyperbole," the spectre snapped. "This is the purpose of consensus. It is not an act of worship to look at the broad consensus in a field to decide what is the truth. It is no different from scientific consensus."

"Scientific consensus," the maiden sneered. "You wouldn't know consensus if it hit you in the face."

"The reality is simple enough for even a stupid idiot like you to understand," the spectre stated matter-of-factly. "Just look at Paula Sanders' 1991 chapter, 'Gendering the Ungendered Body: Hermaphrodites in Medieval Islamic Law' from the book *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*. According to Sanders, the fact that Muslim societies were segregated by gender meant that jurists had to funnel these people into the male or female category, binding them to the gender binary. Would they enter the men's or women's sections of the *mosque*? Would they wear a veil? Would they mingle with men or women in public? What was their inheritance? Who could they marry? Who would prepare their body for the grave? The integrity of all these separate (but equal?) spaces in society was necessary for preventing *fitna*, hence why the majority of the '*ulamā*' categorize these people as male or female in both the past and present."

"This is an outdated view that lacks nuance," the maiden replied. "First, what jurists want the world to be is not what the world really is. A society cannot run if everyone is afraid of the

## Ch 8: The Right Path Has Become Distinct from the Wrong Path

supposed *fitna* that will come if men and women were around each other. Billions of Muslims in the past and present interact with other genders without spontaneously combusting.”

“The *fiqh* is the only thing that matters,” the spectre interrupted.

“I was going to get to that,” the maiden rebuked. “Even in the legal discourse, there is ambiguity. While Sanders argues that all legal scholars maintained the gender binary and upheld male privilege, Indira Falk Gesink disagrees in her 2018 article, ‘Intersex Bodies in Premodern Islamic Discourse: Complicating the Binary.’ This is because they analyze different scholars. Sanders focuses on *Al-Sarakhsī* (d. 1090), *Al-Qudūrī* (d. 1036), *Al-Marghīnānī* (d. 1196), and *Al-Ṭūsī* (d. 1067), but they represent a minority strand of legal reasoning. Gesink analyzes these eleventh and twelfth century jurists, along with several more from a broader time period, including *Al-Ḥalabī* (d. 1549), *Alī Al-Hādī* (d. 868), *Abū Zakariyyā’ al-Nawawī* (d. 1277), *Ibn Qudāma* (d. 1223), *Al-Nu’mān* (d. 974), *Abū Ḥanīfa* (d. 767), *Abū Yūsuf* (d. 798), *Al-Shaybānī* (d. 805), *Al-Thawrī* (d. 778), *Ibn Abī Laylī* (d. 765), *Al-Sha’bī* (d. 722), and *Al-Lu’lu’ī* (d. 819), along with the lexicographer *Al-Khalīl Ibn Aḥmad* (d. 786). Gesink finds that the majority were flexible towards the categorization of *khunthā* and distinguished them as independent from male and female.”

“There must be an error in Gesink’s analysis,” the spectre interrupted. “Their opinions cannot be so divergent.”

“They are not completely divergent. Sanders and Gesink agree that jurists historically preferred establishing a dominant male or female aspect for *khunthās*. They used the orifice an intersex baby urinated from to determine which was dominant (along with similarly antiquated tests). When these tests could determine a dominant sex, these infants were classified as *khunthā gayr al-mushkil* (intersex people of unambiguous sex). When these tests failed, these infants

## Ch 8: The Right Path Has Become Distinct from the Wrong Path

would be unsexed until signs of sexual maturity during puberty (*bulūgh*) determined their dominant sex through things like facial hair, nocturnal emissions, breasts, menstruation, lactation, methods of intercourse, and conception. *Khunthā* also had the autonomy to report signs of sexual maturity on the basis that the privacy of one's *'awrah* meant that jurists/doctors (generally) couldn't verify what was reported. If none of the signs of sexual maturity appeared by the time they became adults, these *khunthā* were categorized as *khunthā mushkil* (ambiguously intersex people/complex sex)."

"Then you are the one misinterpreting things," the spectre added. "Flexibility exists only until ambiguity can be resolved."

"Nope," the maiden replied. "Sanders and Gesink differ on that. According to Sanders, once a jurist made a male, female, or *mushkil* categorization, it was immutable, even if a person's puberty produced signs of sexual maturity defying this categorization. Someone categorized as male due to a urine test or a report of nocturnal emissions would remain so even if they later developed breasts. Once categorized into male or female, contradicting organs were considered 'defects' (*'ayb*) and excised to make the intersex person fully male or female. Likewise, a *khunthā mushkil* could not report a sign of puberty after they were categorized as such."

"But for the jurists Gesink analyzed, prepubescent categorization was provisional, so a *khunthā* could change sex if they reported a sign of sexual maturity that defied a previous urination test. Additionally, *khunthā gayr al-mushkil* were still understood as *khunthā*, so their dominant sex did not negate the other."

"That does not make any sense," the spectre interrupted. "The unambiguous dominant sex does not negate the other? That just sounds like *bid'a* invented by Gesink to retroactively project their Western ideology into the past."

## Ch 8: The Right Path Has Become Distinct from the Wrong Path

“Gesink supports this with *Al-Khalīl Ibn Aḥmad*’s lexicography in his *Kitāb al-‘Ayn*,” the maiden protested. “His lexicography states that one should say ‘*ya khunathu*,’ when hailing a ‘legally male’ person, ‘*ya khanathi*’ for a ‘legally female’ person, and ‘an effeminate male should be hailed as *ya khunathatu* or *ya khunaythatu*.’ These recommendations suggest that eight century Arab society was not interested in rigidly policing the gender spectrum to satisfy some pointless desire for control. Gesink also supports this with the medical discourse of physicians like *Ibn Sīnā* (d. 1037), *Al-Zahrāwī* (d. 1013), and *Şerifeddin Sabuncuoğlu* (d. 1468), for whom quality of life overrode (though inconsistently) the desire to remove ambiguity around sex.”

The spectre scoffed at this notion, grumbling about the audacity of people who think they can overturn centuries of precedence by reading one article. But the maiden kept going.

“Additionally, Sanders and Gesink differ on the nature of *khunthā mushkil*. They both agree that *khunthā mushkil* could be socialized by occupying an intermediary position or socialized according to other rules which favour one gender. For example, some jurists placed *khunthā mushkil* in between the male and female spaces of the mosque, and some jurists favoured the female clothing regulations for the sacred state (*iḥrām*) when a *khunthā* is making the *ḥajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). But they frame it differently. Sanders argues that these regulations prioritize the maintenance of the social hierarchy privileging men as superior to everyone else. Gesink argues that these regulations prioritize the most religiously cautious requirement, resulting in *khunthā mushkil* functioning as a third gender that situationally changes its gendered/intermediary expression. If one favours Gesink, then it seems most jurists and physicians did not override an individual’s bodily autonomy to prioritize the gender binary.”

“And what if one favours Sanders?” the spectre queried.

“Then you have prioritized the minority strand of legal reasoning,” the maiden replied.

## Ch 8: The Right Path Has Become Distinct from the Wrong Path

“Maybe the minority strand is the strand God approved,” the spectre rebutted. “So many of these scholars you bring up come from the later centuries of Islam, when all kinds of *bid‘a* have infected the Muslim world. Perhaps their opinions were removed by God to purify the faith.”

“Did God do this?” the maiden asked sarcastically. “Or was it colonialism? Gesink explains how legal discourse changed in modern history. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, *Hanafi* jurists like the Palestinian mufti *Khayr Al-Dīn Al-Ramlī* (d. 1671) started favouring the gender binary, possibly influenced by earlier polemics. In 1506, the Amir Tarabey of Cairo prosecuted the *Šūfi* Muhammad Ibn Salama, scrutinizing the *khunthā* status of Salama’s wife until the court determined the wife to be a boy. Tarabey’s execution of Salama riled up the homophobic public against *Šūfis*.”

“That just sounds like the application of *fiqh*,” the spectre added.

“What that sounds like is a precursor to the ‘anal examinations’ in Iraq and Egypt. Regardless, jurists continued to recognize the mutability of gender for *khunthā*, but by the twentieth century, British and French attitudes towards hermaphrodites and homosexuals influenced modernist intellectuals and reformers in the Islamic world, such as *Buṭrus al-Bustānī* (d. 1883), *Rifā‘a al-Ṭaḥṭāwī* (d. 1873), *Jurjī Zaydān* (d. 1914), and *Aḥmad Amīn* (d. 1954). This caused twentieth century legal discussions to assume the gender binary, prioritizing the minority opinion of previous centuries.”

“What do you mean, ‘influenced?’ Muslims do not reference Section 377 of the British Colonial Penal Code. They reference the *Qur’ān* and *ḥādīth*. Whatever influence the British asserted did not drive Muslims away from the *Sunnah*.”

“Your understanding of colonialism is too simple,” the maiden said. “Colonization is not



## Ch 8: The Right Path Has Become Distinct from the Wrong Path

simply replacing Indigenous cultures with imperial ones. It is also about hijacking and shaping Indigenous cultures to align them with imperial ones. Just look at the Soviet policy of *korenizatsiia* (indigenization).”

“The Soviets?” the spectre spat. “What do the Soviets have to do with *fiqh* on intersex people?”

“Just listen,” the maiden exclaimed. “Soviet leaders like Lenin and Stalin once believed in providing national autonomy across the Soviet Union. They created resolutions in April and June of 1923 which entrenched representation for the titular nationalities of the Soviet republics and their subnational units. The state apparatus adopted their languages; national elites were promoted in the Communist party, government, and industry; and symbols of national identity like museums, dress, food, and artistic productions were promoted.”

The spectre completely checked out of this history lesson, but the maiden continued.

“This never became anything more than imperial control over identity. In Soviet Ukraine for example, the historiography of non-Marxist Ukrainian historians such as *Mykhailo Hrushevskiy* was suppressed in favour of Bolshevik Ukrainians like *Matvii Iavorsky*, who tended to present Ukrainian history as either vile ‘bourgeois nationalisms’ or off shoots of Russian Bolshevism. To do this, they misrepresented Ukrainian nationalists and socialists and got rid of knowledge which indicated otherwise. The objective of *korenizatsiia* was not to develop national culture, but to make the communist ideology of Soviet imperialism appear native (*rodnaia*), intimate (*blizkaia*), popular (*narodnaia*), and comprehensible (*poniatnaia*) to the nationalities, hence the phrase ‘national in form, socialist in content.’”

“Are you not a socialist?” the spectre asked. “Why would you be so critical of your own ideology?”

## Ch 8: The Right Path Has Become Distinct from the Wrong Path

“Imperialism is imperialism,” the maiden answered. “Whether it be for capitalist, socialist, Russian, or American ideologies, imperialism is fundamentally the same. Any ideology can become imperialistic if hijacked by the right people.”

“So, you really think Muslims are like the Soviet Ukrainians?” the spectre scoffed.

“Yes. *Korenizatsiia* imploded by 1933 when it became apparent that national identities were incompatible with a centralized, and therefore Russified, Soviet party and state. But in the Islamic world, imperial homophobia lasted so long that orthodox Muslims gradually felt like puritanical Victorian worldviews were native to Islam. This persists today because the laws and attitudes from the colonial era are adaptable enough to be maintained after independence. It is literally ‘Islam in form, Victorian in content.’”

“You exaggerate,” the demon dismissed.

“The only difference is that *korenizatsiia* was tied too much to anti-nationalist communism and the policies of the Soviet state. But for issues that don’t involve accusations of ‘bourgeois nationalism,’ the hijacking of culture can be much more subtle and persistent. Instead of just imposing a Victorian culture onto Muslims, British imperialism can elevate Victorian values and punish things that do not align with Victorian values, and if it is done long enough, then colonized cultures, perhaps just the upper echelons of colonized cultures, will bend over backwards to appease Victorian values, forgetting and reinterpreting aspects of their past to maintain their prestige and survival in a colonized world. We have been so focused on leaving no ambiguity for *bid‘a* to proliferate, but what if the hatred of ambiguity itself is *bid‘a* born from the insecurities all of us acquired through colonization.”

The spectre chuckled. “You just love making baseless speculation. You are too far gone in your ideology. It is pointless to even reason with you. Do you not see how these insane ideas

## Ch 8: The Right Path Has Become Distinct from the Wrong Path

threaten Islam with *fitna*?”

“Threaten?” the maiden asked. “This should benefit Islam. Modern intersex Muslims can at least occupy a third gender identity and retain more autonomy over their bodies. That is already a worthy reason to remember the history that we were compelled to forget. But even for transgender Muslims, remembering the history may bear fruit as we learn to live with the ambiguities of this world without the need to flatten it all with a simple *ḥalāl–ḥarām* dichotomy.”

\*\*\*

“You are the one who read these books and articles,” the spectre said to me. “Yet you have not spoken a word. Do you have any convictions of your own?”

Do I have any convictions of my own?

“I do not know,” I said after a long pause. “I just—I just do not know the things I do not know.”

This left both dissatisfied.

“What if I did not do enough research?” I continued. “What if there is something we missed that one of the scholars from Saudi Arabia or Pakistan could say to tear down our arguments like a stack of cards?”

“Not enough research?” the maiden asked with barely contained rage. “What is there left to research?”

“The Arabic,” the spectre asserted. “How do you know these Western scholars did not corrupt the *fiqh* with their translations and interpretations? If you found and read what the jurists wrote in Arabic to see if it matched Gesink’s description more than Sanders’, your case would be robust. But until then, all you have done is provide a literature review, nothing more.”

## Ch 8: The Right Path Has Become Distinct from the Wrong Path

“This is a trick,” the maiden exclaimed. “Every time we get a real argument to advocate for ourselves, you say something like ‘We need a PhD. Only then can we think about trying to advocate for ourselves.’ Isn’t it too convenient for us to be too suicidal for grad school precisely because we never advocated for ourselves in the first place? It’s as if you want to keep us stuck in a catch-22 for the rest of our lives.”

“Tough shit,” the spectre said. “There are a billion Muslims out there who would reject everything you said as Western *bid’a*. A person with humility would not so arrogantly ignore their concerns. A person with humility would acquire the expertise needed to convince these people beyond a shadow of a doubt. If they could not do that, then a person with humility would accept that they lack the expertise to correct their far more knowledgeable superiors. That is what separates those with integrity from those without.”

“There is no humility in that,” the maiden spat. “There is no integrity in that. Imagine if someone said ‘I’ll believe climate change is real or not after I get a PhD in climatology. Until then, I’ll keep driving my hummer to my job in the Alberta oil sands because my superiors told me to.’ This is nothing more than cowardice.”

Cowardice.

“Am I a coward?” I asked. “I doubt my eyes, my ears, my thoughts, my memories, my hopes, my dreams. I thought this was what righteous people did. I thought this held me accountable, preventing me from being blinded by pride. I thought this allowed me to listen to people, understand them, and empathize with their worldview. I thought it was the only thing I could contribute to this world of divisive polarization. I thought it was the only thing I could contribute to this world where people bend reality itself in the name of their identities. It slowly destroyed my life, but surely that sacrifice was worth something, right?”

## Ch 8: The Right Path Has Become Distinct from the Wrong Path

The silence was deafening.

“Is there even a point asking that?” I asked.

“Perhaps there was,” the spectre admitted. “But that time is long gone. Just look at all that you have done in this world.” The spectre shifted, casting Him in shadow except for His head, emphasizing the sutures carved into His skin.

The door was still unlocked by the time I returned. The shards of bloody teeth were gone without a trace, but no sounds could be heard inside.

I took a tentative step forward, silent as a mouse. I rounded the corner to the living room, scanning it inch by inch as my head swiveled.

He was slumped on a prayer mat.

His chest did not rise.

Nearby was His phone, but He did not complete the call.

His *thawb* was cut apart by the paramedics. So too did they cut skin and bone. By the time they stopped the brain bleed, my sins were set in stone.

The next day I noticed one attempted call from His phone to mine, probably an hour after I entered the abyss. What was the abyss like for Him? I massaged my temples to keep them from bursting.

“We don’t have to be defined by those we hurt,” the maiden said.

“You will always be defined by those you hurt,” the spectre answered.

“We can get help. Therapy, medication, maybe an intervention.”

“A waste,” I said.

“It will be scary,” the maiden admitted. “But we can’t let it deter us.”

“None of them knows how to deal with someone like us. None of them will be there for

## Ch 8: The Right Path Has Become Distinct from the Wrong Path

someone like us. None of them will care about someone like us. They will only delay the inevitable.”

The spectre nodded along in agreement.

“What if you’re wrong?” the maiden asked. “What if there are people like us out there who will be there for us, if only we asked for help? It might seem too late, but we won’t feel like that forever. One day, we won’t feel like a failure. We’ll like our own skin again. We’ll find a family that accepts us. We’ll look forward to the future.”

“And how many will we kill until then?” I demanded. “No amount of *estradiol* (estrogen/feminizing hormone), *spironolactone* (anti-androgen hormone), or *progesterone* (women’s health hormone that might be controversial in trans healthcare) will fix a rotten core.”

“He is already a paranoid racist freak,” the spectre added. “You have a disgusting nature. He sees attackers in every shadow. You fetishize other cultures because of your needy personality. He hates everyone who reminds him of himself, and he especially despises everyone who reminds him of His culture. The time for ‘found families’ has long passed.”

“Only God knows the future,” the maiden insisted.

But the *shayāṭīn*’s whispers took root deep in my soul, their terrifying faces of laughter and disgust hollowing me out. By then, the spectre had grown monstrous, covering the entire room in darkness. It was a pillar of obsidian with long arms and two coals set in a face of wrinkled leather. It grew a beard of black cables and a shaved skull with large protruding fractures.

\*\*\*

“Look at what you really are,” His voice commanded.

The maiden protested, but I obeyed.

## Ch 8: The Right Path Has Become Distinct from the Wrong Path

In the window's reflection, I saw a face. From its chin grew a dense black goatee. Above that, chapped lips and a moustache. Above that, a wide nose. From the sides, sprouting sideburns haphazardly covered cheeks in tangles of hair. After that were great big monkey ears and a shaved skull with a barely noticeable hairline inching upwards day by day.

"No more cheating," He commanded.

"Look into your eyes."

With so many reflective surfaces in the modern world, one develops a technique. Squinting helps. So too does relying on the periphery to make out its features. Doing this allowed me to feel like I was looking at someone else. But do not look into the eyes. Preferably, do not even notice the eyes. The eyes were the windows of the soul, and the reminder that your soul existed in something that was not you was unsettling.

The maiden protested a second time, but I obeyed.

There were bags under the eyes despite all my extra hours asleep. Lines were etched into the forehead, and the skin was dry and bumpy. The eyebrows were big and bushy, not quite long enough to become a unibrow. Next to the temples and upper cheeks were red blisters. A long time ago, she used to clean our face with an exfoliator containing hyaluronic acid, but ever since I stopped, a constant stream of stinging pimples dotted the face, and I did not care.

"Into. Your. Eyes."

The maiden protested a third time, but I obeyed.

The black abyss within the iris did not belong to anything that could love. It was both me and not me, the eyes of a demon wearing my skin. I thought it would rip the skin off, revealing scales or horns or flames. Yet the act continued. Blinking when I blinked. Breathing when I breathed. Opening my mouth revealed the demon's crooked broken teeth and grey gums. Bushy

## Ch 8: The Right Path Has Become Distinct from the Wrong Path

eyebrows mimicked shame and disgust, and its eyes matched those emotions 99%. It was just that 1% which made it all wrong. The demon knew it would torment me most with endless ambiguity.

The maiden said something, but He drowned her out.

“Imagine yourself as a woman.”

The demon warped in the mirror. Hair falling. Skin smoothing. Face rounding. But it belonged to someone else. I tried to imagine a face with round glasses and long, shiny hair tied back in a ponytail. I tried a face with lipstick, *kuhl* (eyeliner), and eyeshadow. Thick, plucked, thin, and shaved eyebrows. Straight hair, curly hair, wavy hair. Braids, buns, bobs, and bangs. Earrings, necklaces, piercings. Hijabs, niqabs, scarves, hair clips, hats. An endless array of faces, the maiden’s face included, morphing between one another.

“Can you imagine yourself as any of them?”

“No.”

It was just an imitation. It would be nothing more than an insult for someone like me to wear their faces.

“Do not let Him decide what we are,” the maiden implored, but her voice was so distant. “Anything is better than the face of a demon.”

“And yet you cannot imagine a better life than that of a demon,” He stated, shutting her out. “And you know why.”

She said something, but I could not hear. Everything was blurring, every sound muffling. My knees buckled, the blood leaving my head. Again, amid all the spinning, that Memory bubbled up, and the splitting headache returned, vengeful.

“You cannot escape the choice you made,” He stated. “You know what you are. You



## Ch 8: The Right Path Has Become Distinct from the Wrong Path

know where you belong. You know that you will always be a man who does not deserve a better life.”

The demon in the mirror swirled and swirled as the world spun around the black coals, the *jinn* and *shayāṭīn* cackling all around. Only great evil could be held in those eyes. Evil which destroyed love. Evil which must burn for all eternity.

\*\*\*

“What did you do to my son?” He cried.

“Get out,” the demon in the mirror told Him. “Get out before you get yourself killed.”

He pushed the demon in the mirror.

“What did you do to my son?” He cried once more.

The demon in the mirror had enough, pushing Him into a wall. He yelled, punching the demon while screaming.

The demon opened the door, but He slammed His entire body against it.

His tongue spat poison, and He received it in return.

A tangle of arms and legs pushed and pulled a second time, straining against the door.

One of His arms wrapped around its neck, and He pulled down to unbalance it.

“What did you do to my son?” He cried, over and over and over, the prefrontal cortex of the demon straining, and straining against the rest of its mind.

It wrenched His arm from its neck, but He kept flailing and scratching and grabbing while the demon strained to force itself back upright. Under the motions, it grew so distant, the pressure building against its temples relentlessly.

The demon’s mind snapped, to a degree beyond what one thought was possible.

Instead of pulling up, the demon sent all its weight down with Him into the floor,

## Ch 8: The Right Path Has Become Distinct from the Wrong Path

knocking the wind out of Him. This loosened His grip, so the demon wrenched itself out of His arms and leapt up while He groaned.

It opened the door, glancing back. After so many decades of living with His overwhelming personality, He became a force of nature, as immutable as the sun and moon. But now He was deflated, heaving with sobs, like a god reduced to a child.

“If you learned to shut up for once in your worthless life, you could have kept these delusions, and I would have been free to die in a ditch once you were dead.”

He did not register the cruelty He was subjected to, His mind in a daze. The demon noticed blood from where He bit His tongue, and the sight of it made the demon’s migraine hammer into its brain with every heartbeat.

“Your own wife died because she married someone like you,” the demon spat. “She feared for her life because of your anger. She told me that she needed to get a divorce, and then she hugged me and cried, and said she would do it once I graduated from university and got a job.”

“And do you know what I did?” the demon asked Him.

“Nothing.”

It balled its hands into tight fists, wound like springs, trying keep it all in, but that only made its hatred worse.

“I did not say a single word when she cried in front of me. I convinced myself that she was just being hysterical. You never hit me. I never saw you hit her. If she just put her pride aside and listened to you like I did, then everything would have been fine. Besides, you were so much smarter and older than us, so you naturally made the best decisions. You were socially savvy, you were better at saving money, you even cooked better than her. Only a stupid irrational

## Ch 8: The Right Path Has Become Distinct from the Wrong Path

idiot would disobey your expertise, I thought. I knew back then that I was just regurgitating the misogyny of your degenerate culture, but when the both of you went back to normal, I decided that whatever I did would just ruin everything.”

The demon’s fists turned white as snow, the migraine crushing its brain like a hydraulic press. The demon was in too much pain to care about how its criticisms of His “degenerate culture” was just the hypermasculine breadwinner expectations instilled in Bengali men, a course correction to racist Victorian and Pakistani caricatures. It was in too much pain to care about how the women among His people do not simply accept the “tradition” but fight for greater freedoms so that they may find lives that are worth living. It was in too much pain to even care about how His people have diverse gender identities like the *hijrā*. If only the demon could look beyond its prejudice against *bid‘a*.

“What does the child do when the father fights with the mother?” the demon yelled. “Does the child prioritize the *ḥādīth* commanding it to obey the mother or the *ḥādīth* commanding it to obey the father? Every choice I made would have been wrong, so I thought about killing myself to at least let you end your pathetic excuse of a marriage. And yet I failed her once more.”

The demon paced in a circle while flicking its thumbs to dissipate the hatred. It knew that it was committing evil with every word coming out of its mouth. But that only made its hatred worse, causing every expletive in existence to spew forth.

“You reminded me back then that ‘health is most important,’ as if I cared about avoiding a heart attack.”

The demon was compelled to cave in His skull, barely keeping that murderous hatred at bay. The veins in its neck bulged with tensing muscles.

## Ch 8: The Right Path Has Become Distinct from the Wrong Path

“You were always a worthless *munāfiq* (hypocrite, false believer). The moment either of us stopped taking your shit, you would say it was our fault for making you angry in the first place. That was always the worthless subhuman excuse made by your disgusting people. And yet you still dared to proclaim that health is most important when she was buried.”

He had many lectures on the importance of health. When He was reminded that religion takes precedence over health, He pointed to all the old men in the *masjid* whose failing bodies made them incapable of praying *ṣalāh* without a chair. They could not even prostrate to their own Lord anymore, that was how vital health is for a Muslim. He then pointed to His own health. Every time He woke with a stiff or aching back. Every time His skin tore while building a cupboard because His skin became paper-thin with age. Every time He scraped His skin, and it never fully healed. Every time He had a health scare because of His smoking. He once got a lung biopsy, and when the results came back negative, He was so gracious to His Lord that He quit smoking entirely. Imagine being so scared straight by the prospect of lung cancer that an addiction of more than forty years could disappear in six months, so long after several teeth were lost to the addiction. Then He developed an obsession with eating plants and reducing His carbs, and the lectures on health grew frequent.

And yet, every time He enthusiastically waxed poetics about the value of eggplants or probiotic goat's milk, a brick in the wall separating the demon from the rest of the world was removed. For the demon knew that all this poetry would disappear the moment He was approached with something as small as permitting the shaving of a beard. He would call this crazy, that this craziness could not be diagnosed as gender dysphoria, that this craziness was caused by listening to *waswas*, and that He clearly was not the source of this *waswas*. Even when confronted with the scholarship on Muslims from previous centuries. He would decide that they

## Ch 8: The Right Path Has Become Distinct from the Wrong Path

are just *Shī'a* or that they just represented the *madhāhib* (the schools of thought within *fiqh*), which must be corrupted by centuries of *bid'a*. Even when confronted with the costs of conversion therapy. He would decide that anyone who committed suicide was not a real Muslim, so He never had to be responsible for pushing them off the cliff. After all, if it is not a literal cliff, then it is not a sin. That is why He will never realize that we killed my mom. The mind-numbing insanity to say not so much as 'uff' shattered one more brick, and once the demon was released, it would never care about how His excuses did not reflect the entirety of His culture.

It punched the drywall, creating a hole covering its hand in dust.

He raised His arms up to His head, anticipating a strike, and the demon clicked its tongue. It thought of proclaiming that at least it did not excuse its own anger but realized that this too would be an excuse, which only made its hatred worse.

"You come from a people who think yelling and screaming is 'natural.' You come from a people who proclaim that families are like eggs boiling in a pot—conflict is 'inevitable,' and therefore never your fault. This world would be a much better place if people were executed for using insane analogies to ignore reality. But even in your degenerate analogies, you pretend to be above violence. 'The boiling eggs may bump into each other, but nobody wants the eggs to crack and spill the yolk.' And so, your subhuman social system survives another day."

"But I know what your people are really like. You always made it our duty to deescalate. You push and push and push, and if we did not swallow our hatred, your kind will always break your one rule. And when you do, you will, like the rest of your worthless people, like the rest of your worthless gender, proclaim that everything you want to do is permitted in the *Qur'ān*. Then you will look at us with a face daring us to call you the worst of the *munāfiqūn* (plural of *munāfiq*), knowing that we know that you will make us regret it while proclaiming that

## Ch 8: The Right Path Has Become Distinct from the Wrong Path

everything you did was permitted in the *Qur'ān*.”

The demon saw a look of terror in His eyes, but its heart was hardened long ago. Hardened enough for the hypocrisy in its actions to not do anything but make its hatred worse. Hardened enough to not care about how it was making (plausible but uncharitable) speculations regarding what He and the men in His culture would do if they hit their families. Hardened enough to not care about how toxic masculinity was a problem of cultural socialization that is in the process of being excised in various cultures. Hardened enough to not care about how everything it criticized in His people could be found all around the world, from Kolkata to Beijing. From Jakarta to Moscow. From Amsterdam to Cape Town. From Abuja to Brasília to Toronto. Hardened enough to not care about anything.

He curled into a ball, heaving with sobs. This only incensed the demon's cruelty, feeling in its bones every time He screamed at His worthless child to stop crying. Every time He screamed, His subhuman child cried even more, which made Him scream even more, over and over, until all the memories blended into a mass of unending hate so strong that the memories themselves disintegrated into ash.

The demon cursed and cursed and cursed the only person left who loved the person the demon used to be. It let loose every racist insult made against Bengalis, both those from Muslims and those from non-Muslims. It demeaned His culture and people in every way possible. It cursed His skin, His voice, His face, His clothes, His songs, His language, His dances, and His food. It cursed Him for being a disgusting Bengali and it cursed Him for being an Arabized *Salafist*. It cursed Him for being a stupid Muslim and it cursed Him for being a disgrace to Islam. But none of these contradictions made the demon's hatred subside.

It punched the doorframe to prevent it from creating more holes. It punched and punched

## Ch 8: The Right Path Has Become Distinct from the Wrong Path

the metal until its hands shook with lightning rods of pain, and then it punched some more.

Only when it felt bloody bruises which forced out cold tears with every movement of its fingers, did its hatred finally fizzle out, along with every other sensation. Love, hatred, anger, sadness, fear, joy, gratitude, guilt, shame, regret, envy, admiration, hope. Everything in this world and the next was completely aborted from the demon's soul. It all meant nothing now.

The demon went back into my room and took the leather coat, tapping the knife inside to make sure. It did not take the keys or a phone, reducing the odds that it would be overtaken by what it considered cowardice. It slammed the door shut behind it, caring not what happened to Him.

The spinning slowed, just enough for the full moon to peer into the demon's rotten soul beyond the hospital window.

Its creaking crumbling body heaved with every laboured breath, but its eyes remained as dry as a desert.

It took out the knife again, which glinted in the moonlight.

The path was set in stone now.

**Chapter 9: Garments of Fire Will Be Cut Out for Them**

As far as the eye could see, asphalt and concrete bathed in sickly orange streetlight. The demon in the mirror parked His old Honda civic in the middle of a parking lot. It was bruised and battered and filled to the brim with plastic boxes. He was a bit of a hoarder, collecting a thousand things for His woodworking. Without an owner, the demon sold most of it, but there was still some worthless garbage that had to be destroyed.

“Finish the mission,” the *shayāṭīn* commanded, their shadows stretching far across the asphalt. “Hurry, before you fail to see it through a second time.”

The winter chill cut through the demon to the bone. By now the seasons changed enough to make the leather jacket insufficient. The demon looked up at the sky, but it was completely pitch black, covered in amorphous purple clouds.

The demon unzipped a backpack and took out its contents: a metal tray, a stack of newspapers, and a couple water bottles filled with a straw-yellow fluid.

It was nerve wracking to fill the jug. Every glance from the clerk was accusatory, as if he sensed the demon’s true nature. In the end, he failed to notice or chose not to care. Despite that, the walk back home was haunted by distant police sirens just too quiet to be heard unambiguously.

It set the tray on the asphalt and poured out a bottle. After some flicks of a lighter, it set the mixture alight, adding the newspaper to sustain it. The flickering red and orange flames were



much smaller and quieter than anticipated since the demon had only ever been exposed to fire through movies. So, it added more fuel, allowing the flame to slowly grow into an inferno sufficient to burn all sins to ash.

\*\*\*

In the first box were old clothes. Socks. Shirts. Underwear. Sweatpants. Bed sheets. Smoke billowed forth when they were cast into the flame.

But at the bottom was something else. Articles of clothing made of nylon. Skin cream, exfoliators, sunscreen, nail polish, and lipstick. Pink razors, shaving cream, gels, and several objects wrapped in many plastic bags, including one that was cylindrical in shape.

“A dildo,” the demon in the mirror cursed. “Pathetic.”

I did not purge all evidence of her existence from this world. There were many times when I tried to purge her *nafs*, but the process was not straightforward. I purged her, lived without her, gave into her carnal fantasies, purged her again, and lived without her a bit longer, until I slowly but surely convinced myself that I did not need her or anything she represented. Then, after deciding once and for all who I was, she took control for an hour, so I resolved to reject her perverted disgusting fantasies for another year. This process ended up wasting a couple hundred dollars. One day, beset by licentious fantasies, she purchased her depraved objects (we used a PO box and an alias to make sure the delivery was not a risk). After they were purged, the same thing happened, though she knew to buy less, and to buy inconspicuous objects that could be passed off as knick-knacks and paperweights. She did not keep a diary or journal and made sure her internet activity was entirely separate and secure and easily rendered inaccessible (as far as she was aware). But that did not stop us from checking the door ten times every time to make sure it was locked for certain, nor did it stop us from religiously checking for some mistake in

our online activity.

Her objects were first hidden in a bag high up in a closet behind old blankets. Then they were kept in separate locations, the most inconspicuous stuff joining the rest of the forgettable clutter in my drawers (the idea being that if He looked, they would not stand out enough to imply a sexual capacity). The more ... cylindrical stuff was hidden deep within a dark cabinet behind several clothes, with the female razors in front of the clothes to catch any unwanted attention (the idea being that if He looked there, the female razors would take up all His attention, so if He innocently questioned me about it, I could take it as a sign of oncoming suspicion and quickly purge everything before He searched for more examples of strange behaviour). But none of that really dissuaded the fear that one day He might search through everything, perhaps because He lost something and looked everywhere to find it. If He searched too thoroughly in the wrong place, it would all come crumbling down. I tried to imagine what to do in such a scenario, but I could not imagine any outcome that did involve violence and at least one of our deaths.

I ended up leveraging His hoarding tendencies. When we lived in the three-bedroom apartment, He once transferred a part of His horde to a locker in the building's basement. I later added a plastic box to the locker. He never went down to there again, and if it was cleared out, that plastic box would be thrown out. It was at just the right distance for her to survive, though in an emaciated form. I thought of it as analogous to a narrow gap in an embargo around an island.

When we moved to the one-bedroom apartment, I decided that it was time to limit her to my dreams. But the demon in the mirror decided to finish the job. It was surprised to find the locker undisturbed.

It tossed the nylon stockings and lingerie into the fire. As far as the demon was concerned, they represented nothing more than an insult to women who suffer everyday from

fetishization, objectification, the male gaze, and patriarchal violence. It already proved itself incapable of helping the one woman in its life who ever loved it, so how could it help any others, except through self-destruction? It did not care to consider any alternatives.

But the flame warped and bent, forming abstract images. Lines. Ovals. Wavy hair. Then round eyeglasses.

“Our feelings are normal,” the maiden said. “Trans women often go through a phase of hyper femininity when we’re forced to hide and when we feel insecure. Imagine how much cis women already struggle to figure out themselves in this world that teaches us to devalue ourselves and satisfy the whims of old, white, entitled men. We often mellow out once we gain confidence and figure out the kind of woman, non-binary, and gender-fluid person we want to be.”

The demon in the mirror did not answer. It threw the lipstick and nail polish into the fire. As far as the demon was concerned, they represented nothing more than a crude imitation of femininity. Anyone who saw her in her clown makeup would surely laugh before beating her to death. Of course, that was because she could never turn to her mother for help and guidance, but the demon in the mirror did not care about the why behind why she would be left for dead in a ditch. It did not believe in the benevolence of mankind enough to consider alternative scenarios either.

“And even if we return to this—”

“Masturbation,” the demon in the mirror interrupted.

“Even if we return to this masturbation, we do not need to be ashamed of ourselves.

Hundreds of millions of people out there have kinks even more intense and problematic than us.”

The demon in the mirror did not answer. Around middle school I was made to attend

## Ch 9: Garments of Fire Will Be Cut Out for Them

*madrasa* (Islamic school) classes after school. The students read and memorized the *Qur'ān* and *du'ā'* and received instructions on the basics of Islam. I sucked at the *Qur'ān* and *du'ā'* (I hated my Arabic voice even more than I hated my normal voice), but I was the best in *'aqā'id* (belief), *akhlāq* (character), *adab* (decency/morals/manners), and *fiqh*. In one of those classes, we were instructed that those who “commit *zinā* with their hands are accursed,” and that their hands will be pregnant on the Day of Judgement. Regardless of the dubious authenticity of these instructions, the imagery of my flesh disgusted me. She also had her own standards, constantly annoyed by the race play, erotic humiliation/degradation, and hierarchical play common in Western porn and erotica. Getting gender euphoria from that was like getting nutrition from McDonalds. In any case, her worldview was still so wildly different from my own that her memories were soon forgotten, her emotions disintegrating in the abyss.

“Do you remember how we used to exercise?” the maiden pleaded. “We pushed ourselves for an hour every morning, and it made our breakfast taste so much better. We took pictures to track our progress, and we realized that we felt ugly because the exact same person can look masculine or feminine depending on the pose, camera angle, and lightning.”

The demon in the mirror did not answer. It grabbed the plastic bag, holding it out just beyond the fire.

“We then realized that developing our abs and back muscles would make us feel more feminine, so we added planks and push-ups to our routine. Our arms were too weak back then, but in a month, we were strong enough to complete our routine without any breaks. It wasn't much compared to others, but for us at least, it felt like we no longer filled ourselves with hatred.”

The demon in the mirror did not answer. In the red and orange flames, it could make out

the imprints of some of the objects. That bag did not just contain a dildo. It contained cages, plugs, clamps, collars, gags, vibrators, cleaning supplies, and worse.

“It’s like Weber’s queer logics of statecraft. We do not have to be rigidly bound by the need to appear normal. We can combine normality with perversion however we like, thriving in the ambiguous borderlands of our identities.”

“You would turn sex toys into a philosophy,” it chuckled before casting the plastic bag and everything it contained into the fire. These objects represented nothing more than a pathetic secret that did not deserve to exist, or at least that is what it told itself.

The maiden became crestfallen, but only for a moment.

“This is real philosophy,” she insisted. “The nihilistic politics against trans people today will completely disappear in a hundred years. But it is up to us to make sure we have a place in that future. Just from a cursory reading of Jessica Hinchy’s *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c.1850-1900*, we learned how *hijrās* endured the same politics. They lived in discipleship lineages, some were castrated (though it was not required), and they worked in public performance and migratory alms-collecting, but also in conventional fields like agriculture, trading, and weaving. In the 1850s, British Raj officials drummed up a moral panic in the Northwestern Provinces, claiming that *hijrās* were an obscene presence in public spaces and that their discipleships supposedly abduct, castrate, and prostitute children. Upper-middle class Indians at the time ate up and promoted this dehumanizing rhetoric, but the *hijrās* resisted these cynical attempts at colonial control. There is integrity in standing up for what is right just as those before us did. Just as the trans activists before us did, like Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson. Without them, these Western countries would still be as Victorian as they were on days they were founded. There is integrity in demanding that people today deserve lives that are worth

living, in this world and the next.”

The maiden’s voice took on a feverish pitch, hoping that something it said was getting through.

“We didn’t always hate our skin,” the maiden asserted. “We used to shave it in the shower and used skin cream to reduce irritation. We realized that there was this one lotion that seemed to reduce blemishes and stretch marks. Do you remember?”

The demon in the mirror did not answer. It gathered all the creams, exfoliators, gels, sunscreens, razors, and shaving cream, including the lotion the maiden praised.

“Do you remember how one day we noticed the morning sun reflecting in our skin? How our smooth skin looked like burnished bronze, and we did not hate its colour or how our thighs were covered in scars? Surely, we were on the right path. Surely, we can find that path again.”

The demon in the mirror tossed it all into the fire, where the shaving cream exploded. It represented nothing more than an idiot girl’s pipedreams, or at least that is what it told itself.

\*\*\*

The rest of the boxes contained ordinary things. Unsold clothes, hangars, rulers, screwdrivers. Some notes from university. Report cards and certificates from school. One contained several jars of mold. I once tried to recreate His pasta recipe, which He picked up while working day in and day out at an Italian restaurant. I did not make it properly. Was the stove too hot? Did I mix the sauce well enough? Did I put in enough oil when boiling the pasta to keep it from sticking? Did I let the pasta boil long enough? Did I let it boil too long? Was I cutting the onions and mushrooms and garlic wrong? I made something edible despite my doubts, but it was not the same without Him.

Whenever we cooked pasta, He would kiss the side of my forehead and tell me I was the

greatest boy in the world. I think He saw me no differently from the toddler He once cooed to decades ago. And yet, somewhere along the way the demon in the mirror must have decided that what He said when He was angry was what He felt authentically. Everything else was just a delusion He said to convince Himself to keep me around. The migraines that came every time the demon thought about that prevented it from trying again.

The mold burned black.

The fumes disoriented the demon in the mirror, like the earth was turning without it. But the demon kept going, taking out a box filled with stacks of paper and plastic. The documents and cards were no longer necessary. Health cards. Coupons. Licenses. Insurance. Passports. Evidence that He existed.

“It is never too late,” the maiden insisted.

“It is always too late,” the towering *shayāṭīn* demanded.

The demon in the mirror started tossing the cards into the flame one by one.

“People far older than us have transitioned. They made the leap of faith and came out a better person.”

The demon in the mirror tossed their driver’s license.

“People far worse than us are working on their mistakes,” the maiden continued.

“Through hard work and dedication, they at least try to make this world a better place. Surely, a life like that is better than this.”

“Who cares,” the demon in the mirror said, tossing its passport into the flame.

“Who cares?” the maiden asked incredulously.

The maiden tried to maintain the mask she wore for the sake of respectability, but it all shattered in the face of such nihilism.

“There is no justice in this! This does nothing to improve the wellbeing of anyone in this world. Someone is going to end up inhaling these fumes and some underpaid worker is going to be forced to clean up this mess.”

“Tough shit.”

“How long ago was it when our spooky scary friends convinced us that this was the path of integrity and accountability, while everything I said was selfish immorality? Huh?”

The demon in the mirror did not answer.

“They lied to us!” the maiden yelled.

“They used our sense of duty against us! They used our love against us!”

“They convinced us to suffer more than we deserved!”

“They convinced us that we were in more control than we were!”

“We lost everyone we ever loved because of them, and we’re losing everything we have left because you keep listening to them!”

I did not answer.

“We must let go of their nihilistic ideology. We already know that their ideology crumbles under scrutiny. We already know that their ideology does not have integrity. We already know that their ideology is nothing more than a bastardization of Islam. *Qad*. Certainly. *Khasira -lladhīna qatalū awlādahum*. Lost are those who killed their children. *Safahan bighayri ‘il’m*. Foolishly, without knowledge. *Waḥarramū mā razaqahumu l-lahu f’tirāan ‘alā l-lah*. And forbidding that which has been provided to them by *Allāh*—inventing lies against *Allāh*. *Qad ḍallū wamā kānū muh’tadīn*. Certainly, they have gone astray and were not guided.”

The demon did not answer, for it knew how the *munāfiqūn* would absolve themselves of their sins.



“This verse only refers to the newborn girls who were buried alive because of the shame and poverty attached to daughters in the *Jāhilīyya*. Metaphor does not matter.”

“How many trans daughters do we bury alive, forbidden from taking a single breath free to be themselves? We cannot be led astray by ignorant people who attach shame and poverty to trans daughters. We must banish their ideological disease before it destroys the rest of our soul.”

The demon did not answer, for it found the last item. His passport.

It should have just tossed His passport in, but it opened the passport to His photo. His government identifications changed over the years. An old piece of identification from His country contained a man with dark, coiled black hair and a buttoned-up shirt—a young Bengali man who would do whatever it took to support His family. When He first adopted the *salafiyya* worldview, He wore a white *thawb* with a checkered *kūfiyya* wrapped around His head. But since passport photos are designed to be anti-photogenic, it made Him look like an Islamist taking a mugshot. He then scaled it back a bit, wearing a buttoned-up shirt with a *ṭopī* on His head, His wrinkles, crow’s feet, and long white beard attesting to the journey that sent Him there.

In the light of the fire, the demon noticed every sign of aging, worn down from decades of sacrifice. The demon’s vision went blurry, and it fell to its knees.

It still did not cry, but the sickening lurching sensation across its body was overwhelming, as if the pit in one’s stomach when one feels dread became a permanent fundamental emotion as strong as anger, joy, fear, and anguish.

“Worthless degenerate idiot,” the *shayāṭīn* condemned, dripping with disgust.

The demon resisted their demand.

“For once in your pathetic subhuman life do not fail.”

“Hurry, before you fail the rest of the world again.”

“Do not fail them again.”

“Do not fail them all like you failed your entire family.”

His face blackened as the passport curled and turned black, melting like ice in the summer sun. The moment it did this, the demon in the mirror tried to sketch His face in its mind, but the exact details already escaped its memory, His face losing definition with every passing second.

“What is the point in trying anymore?” the demon in the mirror demanded. “Is someone going to hug me and tell me this hell is over while I sob like a child?”

“Hah! I am too broken to cry. Too broken to cry when my mother was lowered into the earth. Too broken to cry when my father was lowered into the earth. Just do the world a favour and leave already.”

\*\*\*

“What if one of our cousins or nieces or nephews are not going through similar struggles?” she inquired. “What if the only thing they need is someone in our family to set a precedent? Do you really think leaving them alone in this hell of a world is going to do them a favour?”

The demon in the mirror laughed.

“I would just end up killing them. Just as I killed Him ... and just as I killed my own mother.”

“It is in your very nature to kill everything you touch,” the *shayāṭīn* added.

“No!” the maiden roared.

“Do not listen to their lies. It is not too late. It is never too late. Just think of all we have left to offer to this world.”

The demon in the mirror snickered at the suggestion. It crawled back to His car and slammed the door shut.

“Take an issue like Palestine,” the maiden continued frantically. “Everyone seems to be stuck in polarized arguments pitting Jews against Muslims. It seems inevitable. After all, what other real sanctuaries exist for Jewish people in this antisemitic world except the state of Israel? Is it not inevitable for them to defend the only country in this world that protects them thanks to the dedication of their parents and grandparents?”

The demon in the mirror shook its head, trying to shut out her desperation.

“This does not justify genocide, and we are certain that the only reason anybody does not call it genocide is because identity without integrity enables the bending of reality. What this means is that identity must be directly addressed. One can imagine how psychologically difficult it is to choose between defending genocide and betraying the parents and grandparents who sacrificed everything for the sake of one’s Israeli citizenship.”

The demon in the mirror turned the keys in the ignition, but the engine sputtered out. It tried again and again and again, but it still did not work. It cursed under its breath while opening the door again.

“You remember how we started wondering if there were commonalities between our struggles over identity, right? The relationship between Jews and Israel is probably even more dysfunctional than our relationships with Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia demands us to be anti-*Shī‘a*, anti-*Şūfī*, and *Salafist* to maintain the ideological borders granting us “divine” citizenship. But Israel demands that Jews be anti-Palestinian, anti-Orthodox, and colonialist to maintain the literal borders granting them literal Israeli citizenship. The same process leading us out of the *Salafiyya* ideology despite the perceived betrayal of our father might connect to Jews

in a similar identity puzzle.”

The demon in the mirror clicked its tongue when it opened His car’s hood. He had somehow figured out how to fix cars, but the demon was too stupid. It fumbled with everything inside in a futile attempt to make anything work.

“Sure, we haven’t done enough research to concretely connect these things together,” the maiden conceded. “But the cursory reading we have already done looks promising.”

The demon slammed its fist against the engine block, unleashing expletive after expletive. He tried to teach it something useful about car engines. When the Honda Civic had previous issues with the wiring of its lights, the demon shown a flashlight while He talked about His process for fixing those issues. But none of it could be recalled, only the vague feeling of trying to hold the flashlight right to make sure He did not get angry.

“Just look at our own people. Genocide has been attempted against us, but we have also attempted genocide against others. For us, it is against the *ādibāsi* (aboriginal inhabitants) of Bangladesh’s Southeastern Chittagong Hill Tracts district. They are predominantly comprised of the Buddhist Sino-Tibetan *Chakmas*, alongside Hindu and Christian and Animist ethnic groups like the *Marmas*, *Tipperas*, *Murungs*, *Tanchaungs*, *Kamis*, *Reangs*, *Lusheis*, *Bawn*, *Khumi*, *Sak*, and *Pangkhua*.”

The demon’s hands were covered in grease and dust and oil. Huffing and puffing with rage, it released its anger on inconspicuous caps and plugs and pipes, twisting and pulling and breaking them at random.

“When these groups pushed for regional autonomy, just as our country did when it was part of Pakistan, our country’s leaders denied them, just as Pakistan’s leaders denied us. Our country’s leaders, like Pakistan’s leaders, were too wrapped up in colonial and ethnic chauvinist

mindsets. So the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts began to politically identify as the *Jummā* (named for the *jhum* agricultural practice in Chittagong, not the Islamic Friday prayer), and from 1975 until 1997, ethnic Bengalis started settling into the Hill Tracts while the state waged a war against the *Jummā* in what some call a ‘creeping genocide.’”

The demon in the mirror got back in His car, dirtying His steering wheel with engine grease. It put the key in the ignition and turned. The engine sputtered out. It turned again. The engine sputtered out. It tried again and again, turning harder and harder as if it just had to get some forbidden technique to make the engine work.

“Many of them were forcibly resettled into villages close to army camps for surveillance, which increased harassment, arrests, abductions, torture, forced marriage, and sexual assault by army personnel. Those soldiers committed massacres and burned houses as reprisals on those who attacked army camps and Bengali settlers, creating tens of thousands of *Jummā* refugees living in camps in India. Eventually, the government came to a settlement, but did not investigate the massacres or abductions, did not rehabilitate refugees, and did not restore land confiscated from them during the war. The region remains under continued militarization. There must be a connection between the *Jummā* and the Palestinians and the rest of the Indigenous peoples in this world. Surely, we have something to contribute to the conversation.”

After turning the key in the ignition for the thirtieth time, the demon in the mirror realized His car was worthless without Him.

\*\*\*

“Enough!” the demon in the mirror exclaimed.

It took the key in its fist, the tip pointing out like brass knuckles, and punched the rearview mirror until it shattered.

“I know what you are trying to do.”

Kicking the door open, the demon punched the side mirrors until they broke.

“You cannot keep distracting me with books.”

It opened the hood again, fiddling around until it wrenched a sparkplug from the engine block. It saw those videos and vaguely remembered the technique.

“Nobody cares. People do not have ‘conversations.’ They expel their hatred and resentment into some target on social media. There are industries worth hundreds of billions of dollars dedicated to weaponizing the collective human spirit against itself. I should have just killed myself instead of maintaining this delusional hope that someone will think we had enough value to be loved if I read enough books.”

It slammed a fist with the sparkplug jutting out, but the window did not shatter. It cursed, and it tried again and again, turning the sparkplug around and angling it. Over and over until it finally figured out the proper technique to shatter the tempered glass. It then went through all the glass in the car, shattering everything which functioned as a mirror until blood flowed from its knuckles. It then went for the license plate, kicking and scratching it in a futile attempt to remove it. But the letters and plate did not budge, easily recognizable for the first cop to verify when they were called.

The demon in the mirror turned its back on the flame, preparing to run all the way to its grave. But it only got a couple steps when it was overwhelmed by the strain inside its head, falling to the ground as all the energy left its body.

When it came to, the flame was still there, though much dimmer. Every ache and pain in its mind and body prevented it from moving, the cold wet layer of grey slush beneath sapping it of its strength. The best it could do was turn its head away from the flame so that it did not have

to look at her, and even this caused the world to swirl in the demon's dimmed vision.

"I am too tired," the demon in the mirror groaned.

"I am too tired to care about the queer statecraft in sex toys and *hijrās*. I am too tired to care about role models for His supposedly queer family members. I am too tired to care about Palestine and Israel and Chittagong. I am too tired to care about the bounties of heaven. I am too tired to care about its rivers of milk and honey. I am too tired to care about its houses and thrones of gold. I am too tired to care about its exotic fruit. I am too tired to care about its immortal servants and perfect spouses. I am too tired to care about you. Everything that once made me happy is destroyed and there is nothing left in this world or the next that will ever fix it. The only thing I want is to sleep in complete silence forever in a dreamless void until the end of time."

The demon waited for her response.

It waited, and waited, and waited.

It turned to the flame, but she was not there. It looked to the shadows cast by the car, expecting one of the *shayāṭīn* to say something. It saw something stir for a moment, but nothing happened. None of the voices remained, only the low crackling of a secret which no longer existed, in this world or the next.

**Chapter 10: They Will Abide Therein Forever**

The demon in the mirror took a myriad of mugshots and fingerprints before it was left alone in a holding cell. It waited and waited for someone to appear, but the cell's fluorescent lights made it so that not a single millimeter of space was touched in shadow. It strained to hear them, but only received the distant voices coming from other people's cells. Without either of them, the demon was an empty husk, no thoughts or feelings passing through its mind or soul at all.

Some cops eventually came to question it. They were indistinguishable from one another, their pink balding heads shining like bowling balls of flesh under the light of the interrogation room. They asked why the demon set a fire in a parking lot, what it burned, where its license was, and why it kept knives in its pockets. The demon spun a story.

"I set the fire just for fun," it said. "I just burned some old clothes, nothing important. I lost my license card, but I still have a valid license. I will never drive without a license again. The knives were just for hiking. I forgot to leave them at home today."

Even when they asked it about a father who died months earlier, the demon spun a story.

"That is completely unrelated. In Islam, one does not mourn the dead for more than three days. I just wanted to have some fun." They shrugged at this religious explanation, failing to notice how the demon did not pray *ṣalāh* at all in its cell. It stopped going with the motions the moment it was finished with His *Janāza*.



Even when they asked about His car's shattered glass, the demon spun more and more stories about how the car was too old to bother getting it towed and fixed. The demon ignored its cut and bruised knuckles.

They did not buy it. This secret was impossible to keep when compared to the last one. But they also had better things to do than waste their time on a first-time offender, so the demon heard its charges in court a couple days later: third degree arson, vandalism, trespassing, reckless endangerment, driving without possession of a license, and carrying a concealed weapon without authorization.

When it plead guilty, the judge, a tall and lanky white man with silver hair but not a single wrinkle (probably due to a good skincare routine and lack of outdoor labour), did not grant bail. This judge issued a mental health evaluation to determine if the demon posed a threat to itself or the public.

\*\*\*

That was how the demon found itself staring at a specific white concrete brick in the walls of the detention center's designated room for video calls. After some time waiting for a screen to load, the psychiatrist's compressed voice spat out of a cheap set of speakers.

In the demon's periphery, it noticed the video feed. The white room, orange prison uniform, goatee, unkempt hair, pockmarked skin, and black coal eyes made the demon look like one on both the outside and the inside. Especially when placed right next to the video feed of the psychiatrist and her wavy blonde hair, shiny white skin, white smile, and the paintings of summer beaches decorating her office. In previous decades, the demon would suppress her mix of fetishistic attraction and envy. But now the demon did not feel anything at all.

They went through normal psychiatric customs. The psychiatrist asked a bunch of

questions to establish rapport, and she received one-word replies. A court-issued examination did not sound like a process that could be trusted with vulnerability. Anything the demon said can and will be used against it. Besides, even if the court did issue some medical treatment, the demon told itself that it was too little too late. Some people are just unfixable in the demon's eyes, and many religious people belong in that unfixable category. These people may ask questions like "is it healthier to be compassionate to yourself?" or "how would you speak to a friend in a similar situation?" or "is perfection realistic?" This does not matter to many religious people so long as they define themselves by their religious duty, their religious sacrifice, and their religious suffering.

Health is subservient to religious duty, not the other way around. If it was, then God would not inflict soul-shattering tests whose recompense exists in the hereafter, if one was lucky. Friends are friendly because they do not suffer because of their advice. Would a friend remain a friend if God questioned them on the Day of Judgement for collaborating upon sin and transgression? Perfection is mandatory for a believer. Most Muslims will not enter *Al-Firdaws* (the paradise/highest level of *Jannāt*), and most will not be in *Al-Hāwiya* (the abyss/pit/lowest level of *Jahannam*) forever, yet they must act like these are the only options, fighting against every sin as an existential threat. If they did not, then they may be willing to tolerate some sins in their life, or perhaps no longer believe that certain sins are sinful, which is tantamount to *kufr*. A successful Muslim (or a hypocritical one) could arguably let go of these arguments as excessively life-denying, perhaps even Victorian in content. But for those who believe their worth and integrity lies exclusively in religious suffering, sacrifice becomes more tolerable than abandoning the contradictions destroying their lives.

When asked to describe what happened before it was arrested, the demon relayed the

same story it spun to the cops, saying as little as possible to betray as little as possible.

“You said you broke the glass in your dad’s car. Was that part of the fun?”

“Yes.”

“You have some bandages around your arms. Did you get that from breaking the glass?”

The demon crossed its arms in a late attempt to conceal its shame. It cursed itself for being too slow to formulate a performance befitting the secret. It tried to weigh the outcomes between more lies or half-truths, but its mind was shattered too much for advanced prediction.

“Yes. It was not as easy as I hoped.”

The psychologist made a hmmm, and an “I see” to coax more, but the demon knew this tactic, so they sat in the awkward silence.

The silence continued.

“I can imagine that would be frustrating,” the psychiatrist said after fifty seconds passed.

“Okay,” the demon replied.

“Were you frustrated when you set the clothes on fire?”

“No.”

“Was it after?”

“Ye–yes.”

“And that was while you were breaking the glass of your dad’s car?”

“Sure,” the demon said after half a minute.

The psychiatrist sighed and jotted down some notes. She then asked about the demon’s medical history.

“I went to a doctor the last time I was in university so ... ten–no, eleven years ago.”

“That’s a long time,” she said.

“Okay.”

“Is there a reason why you didn’t see a doctor?”

What was the point of doctors for someone obligated to suppress their *nafs*?

“I did not feel like I need to.”

“Can you tell me what you visited the doctor for?”

“I was just trying the therapy services of my university while I was studying.”

These people did not know enough about *fiqh* or political science to stop the anguish caused by everything it was learning and fearing at the time, so it stopped going to therapy.

“It was just because of academic stress. They prescribed *escitalopram* (anxiety medication), but nothing else was needed.”

“Are you still taking anxiety medications?”

The only difference was an upset stomach and many wasted hours trying to gauge whether the medication caused any changes in mood.

“No.”

“How did it make you feel?”

The demon did not know at any point in its life how to advocate for itself. It had such a nonexistent understanding of what its mind or body was ever feeling that the diagnostic questions just did not make sense at all. How is someone so used to suppressing and managing the *nafs* supposed to answer a question like “how have your anxiety levels been over the past two weeks” or “have you been feeling irritable or depressed?”

“I did not notice any affect. I think it might be related to *normative male alexithymia* (some men’s limitations in expressing emotion due to masculine norms of socialization).”

The psychologist made a hmmm, but the demon did not elaborate.

“Was there anything else you talked about?”

“They said that I might have had autism, but I never bothered getting a diagnosis.”

“How do you think it would feel if you got a diagnosis?”

“I do not see a point in getting a diagnosis.”

The demon believed it was too privileged for excuses, or at least what it considered an excuse. A man of integrity must bear its failures in silence. This feeling was reinforced by its fear of healthcare systems, whose esoteric complexities, exhausted workers, and potential for medical malpractice convinced the demon that a person who suppressed the *nafs* could not survive if it found itself in a healthcare setting. Besides, that Promise demanded zero risk of being escorted to a psychiatric ward, so the demon could not trust anyone with vulnerability. This was one of the stupider mistakes the demon made in its life.

“Have you been feeling any anxiety lately?” the psychiatrist asked.

“No.”

“How would you describe your mood?”

“Tired.”

“Have you had any troubling thoughts lately?”

“What do you mean?”

“Thoughts of feeling hopeless or of hurting yourself or others?”

“Everyone must feel hopeless with what is going on in the world right now.”

She made a hmmm of understanding

“How often do you feel hopeless?” she asked.

The demon cursed itself for walking into that trap, or at least what it perceived to be a trap.

“Why would I not?” the demon asserted. “There are genocides being attempted against the Ukrainians, the Palestinians, the Uyghur, the Rohingya, the Tigrayans, the Darfuri, and the Yemeni. That is just what I can recall off the top of my head. And yet we still get caught in this whole song and dance about how genocide must not be overused or else it will ‘lose its power.’ I am sure that has no relation to the fact that we live in a city built on dispossession and attempted genocide. I am sure that has no relation to the fact that this country addresses genocide with a mere wish to acknowledge—not even a direct acknowledgement—that we operate on traditional land—not even the sovereign land—of the *Huron-Wendat*, the *Seneca*, and the *Mississaugas of the Credit* First Nations. What kind of person would not feel hopeless in this godforsaken hell?”

There are around seventy distinct Indigenous languages in Canada, broadly grouped into twelve separate language families (with additional subdivisions). The First Nations of the Great Lakes Region belong to the Iroquoian and Algonquian language families (as far as I am aware). There is a tendency to treat these nations as irrelevant ancient history, as pointless to bring up in Canadian politics as the Carolingian Empire or the Battle of Hastings in British and French politics. A summary of the history after European contact demonstrates the errors in this way of thinking (keep in mind I am not an Indigenous person or scholar so my brief account may have errors and omissions).

Before the 1756–1763 Seven Years’ War, these First Nations were concerned with the immediate impacts of contact. The old-world diseases halved their populations by the 1640s. This, along with the lucrative trade in beaver pelts (to satisfy European demand for felt hats), convinced the *Haudenosaunee Confederacy* (aka the Iroquois) to subjugate the other Iroquoian nations in the 1640–1701 *Iroquois Wars/Beaver Wars*. The trading settlements of the French and British (and the Dutch to a lesser extent) supplied goods, firearms, and military support to the

nations their countries allied with, and the more balanced power dynamics of this time prevented the European powers from bending the First Nations to their every whim.

After the 1763 and 1783 Treaties of Paris secured British hegemony and US independence, their relationship with the Anglophone states changed. As early as the 1770s, the influx of European immigrants in the farming and mining sectors transformed Anglophone views towards Indigenous peoples. Indigenous hunter-gatherer lifestyles became obstacles to economic development, which worked alongside the influx of British Loyalist refugees from the American Revolution to create the settlements that now constitute the Greater Toronto Area. The treaties and decrees between 1781 and 1847 were interpreted by the Crown as complete land purchases from Indigenous peoples, who were now understood as British subjects living in “reserves” under British jurisdiction. This defied previous guarantees of Indigenous self-government by the Crown, like the 1763 Royal Proclamation and the 1764 Treaty of Niagara. Without the economic or political dynamics of the previous century, the Crown could get away with abandoning legal conventions to serve its own interests. These processes, along with laws promoting Indigenous assimilation, such as the 1876 *Indian Act*, corralled these nations to smaller and smaller reserves over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their right to exist could now be encroached upon by Anglophone development, paternalistic laws limiting their freedoms, and laws banning or controlling their own ceremonies. The result is the contemporary situation, where the *Seneca* (*Onöndowa'ga:*'), *Wendat*, and *Mississaugas of the Credit* (*Mazina'iga-ziibing Misi-zaagiwininiwag*) First Nations have reserves in Southwestern Ontario, Quebec, Kansas, and Oklahoma. And yet, none of this recent political history is recognized by the land acknowledgements in this country.

The psychologist made a hmmm of understanding to affirm the demon's feelings, though

the demon felt nothing in it but condescension. The psychologist then asked if the demon's actions were connected to these events in the news, and it denied it, knowing that it would just be an insult to compare its complaining to the gravitas of these issues. The psychiatrist asked if there were any events in the demon's personal life which might have influenced its actions, and it denied any.

"I was told there was a death in your family not too long ago. Can you explain what happened?"

"No," the demon flatly refused.

"Thank you for your honesty," the psychologist said tentatively. "But to complete this assessment, we must talk a bit about what happened."

The demon cursed itself for letting its emotions leak through. There was not enough brainpower to perform the lies. Yet it knew that it could not reveal the truth to anyone. They will hurt it. They will beat it. They will kill it, and they will laugh at it while doing so, and then forget that it ever existed at all. The only option was that Promise. The secret cannot exist no matter what. That absolute belief was the only thing that kept it alive for thirty years. That absolute belief was so strong that even though it knew that Promise destroyed its entire life, the demon still could not let it go.

"What is there to explain?" the demon spat. "He lived, then I was born, and now my father is dead. Someone like Him is always dying somewhere in this world every second."

She made a hmmm again, nodding her head.

"What was it like for you?"

The demon clicked its tongue.

"How would you feel?" it spat.



“I would feel horrible,” she said ignoring the demon’s vitriol. “Does that sound like how you felt?”

“Sure.”

She made a hmmm again, but the demon did not continue.

“Could you describe your relationship with your father?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Did you have a good relationship with him?”

“Sure.”

“Are there any memories that stand out to you?”

“No.”

“Any memories from your childhood?”

“I do not recall.”

“Why do you think that is?”

The demon clicked its tongue, the pressure in its jaw and temples wearing its patience thin. It shook its head.

“I do not care to know why that is.”

The psychiatrist sighed.

“The picture I’m getting is not very clear,” she admitted. “You mentioned how you had a good relationship with your dad, that you had some anxiety in university and some signs of autism but never got it confirmed, and that you’ve been feeling hopeless lately because of the news. I don’t see how this connects to the charges you’re facing right now.”

The demon closed its eyes to shut out the spinning world all around it, but that only raised the pressure behind its eyelids.

“I appreciate your cooperation so far, but without anything else, I’ll have to assess the risk you pose based on this information alone.”

The demon in the mirror cursed itself for getting into this mess. It cursed itself for being so pathetic and worthless and tired. There might have been a time when there was something worthwhile in its soul. But now there is nothing. The only thing it can do is keep cycling the same stupid nihilistic self-hatred over and over and over and over and over and over until its mind was left a barren waste. This had to be what spiritual putrefaction looked like. Wracked by yet another overwhelming migraine, something that had already snapped once again snapped.

“Fine,” the demon said through gritted teeth.

“Fine. Fine. I do threaten everyone’s safety. I was always a threat to the only people who ever loved me, so why would I not be a threat to everyone else?”

“Why do you believe you are a threat to those who love you?” the psychologist asked.

“It is in my nature,” the demon said matter-of-factly. “From the day I was born, I was always a drain on their lives. If I was not born, they would still be alive.”

“Are you sure they would still be alive if you weren’t born?” the psychologist asked.

The demon did not know what to say. It thought about breaking that Promise. It thought about revealing what happened in that Memory. It thought about revealing the truth about what it planned to do once it left this place.

“Do not make things messier than they have to be,” it heard someone say.

Its eyes darted across the room while it kept its head still, trying to not show signs of insanity. It could not find them, but it knew they were there, just beyond its vision. Their voices were unmistakable, just as unmistakable as their laughs. The demon was terrified of their laughs. It was even more terrified at how glad it was to not be alone anymore.

“I—I do not know,” the demon said.

“You are going to kill yourself regardless of what happens,” the *shayāṭīn* reminded the demon. “Whether it be in a prison or a hospital or a ditch, it matters not. But do not make things messier than they need to be.”

The psychologist made a hmmm again, and the demon continued.

“I guess I just convinced myself that my happiness required other people to suffer. So, if I was unhappy, I thought it would make someone else happy.”

“Do not sully His memory with your baggage,” the *shayāṭīn* reminded the demon.

“I guess I just convinced myself that I did not need help at all. I mean, I just do not feel entitled to help. I have all my arms and legs. I can sit and stand and run. I can speak and listen. Many out there would kill to be in my position. Any problem I had was a problem I had to solve on my own.”

“Do not make His family endure the sins you committed against Him and His wife. Do not make this overworked psychologist endure more than they must.”

“I guess I just convinced myself that I was failing someone from the day I was born, which meant that I must endure anything anyone demanded of me. I must think of myself as somehow invulnerable, somehow more machine than man, while at the same time thinking of myself as disposable, easily replaced once I did prove vulnerable.”

“Just finish the job,” the *shayāṭīn* said. “The part of you that wants to live is already dead. The part of you that is moral is already dead. Just shut up and leave already.”

“I just do not perceive myself as a human, I guess. I never belonged anywhere or with anybody. It was always just me, so I accepted that I was always meant to be alone.”

“You’re not alone,” the psychiatrist reassured. “There are many other people out there

with similar struggles.”

The demon snorted at such a vacuous statement. He always said vacuous things like “I know what it was like when I was your age” to claim that He was somehow capable of understanding His child’s feelings. By now the demon held an unshakeable conviction that it crossed the point of no return. The only people who truly understood it must be dead, or at least that is what it told itself.

“I do not know,” it said.

“Have you talked to anyone about these feelings?” the psychiatrist said after making a hmmm.

“No. Yes. Just some ... friends.”

The psychiatrist waited for the demon to continue, its lips trying to form the right words.

“They said I should—,” the demon began.

“That I should—”

“That—That I should not make things messier.”

The psychologist made a hmmm before asking what the demon thought about this advice.

The demon replied that it just had to accept its life for what it is and move on.

This filled the demon with an eerie calm. The answers sped by as the psychiatrist finished the evaluation. It repeated the same story it spun to the cops. The knives were just for outdoor hikes. It did not have thoughts about harming itself or others. It was not hearing or seeing anything strange, nor was it planning to commit arson. It just needed to release some pent-up aggression, and now it is prepared to go back to work once it is released. It told the psychiatrist that it will rely on these acquaintances and the advice they give to deal with these troubling

feelings.

This calm remained when it was left alone in that white room in the detention center. This calm remained for the following weeks when, after staring at a white ceiling in bed for half of its waking hours, the demon was released on probation with a fine and 200 hours of community service. This calm remained when it went to several government buildings to reissue its “lost” driver’s license. This calm remained when it went to the police station and found out that His black leather coat will not be returned. This calm remained when, a year into its probation, it bought a rental car, a parka, winter pants, boots, mittens, another “camping” knife, and some food for the long trip north. This calm remained when it noticed His spectre in its periphery, filling up a seat the way He did (one hand on the wheel and the other resting on the center console). He made sure the demon saw the plan through to the end.

## Chapter 11: Signs for Those of Understanding

Each step in the raging blizzard brought the demon in the mirror closer to the end. The knee-deep snow soaked through its winter boots, socks, and multiple layers of pants. The upper body remained insulated under two coats, but icy daggers sliced the exposed skin around the demon's eyes.

At a specific section of the highway, the demon in the mirror parked the rental car off the side of the road and headed east. It did not want to cause too much of an inconvenience to anybody. To make sure of that, it threw its phone and car keys onto the highway. The snow would probably bury them, and if not, a passing car would certainly shatter them.

The plan was to trek across the dense, untouched thicket until it met a cliff facing a lake. Reaching it would provide an unobstructed view once the blizzard cleared. The demon wanted to view at least one true majesty of this world before it met its end.

But the demon in the mirror did not reach the cliff. It got lost in the forest, disoriented by the white haze created by the blizzard. After trudging through snow and tree roots until sunset, the demon wondered if it parked the car at the wrong spot. The demon could not get The GPS to work in these conditions, so it doubted its spatial judgement.

But when the demon doubled back, it realized that half its tracks were already covered, and when it doubled back on its doubling back, the same was true for those tracks. As the battering snow worsened, it found itself venturing deeper and deeper into the forest for

protection. Eventually, the daggers cutting its eyes ceased, but by then, it was surrounded by dark brown bark and snow. The cliff might as well be on the moon.

The demon's attempts to find a clearing also failed, the black and white canopy of branches extending endlessly upwards and outwards. It began to realize that its fate lay in a sarcophagus of roots and ice as the last vestiges of the setting sun turned the entire world black, impossible to navigate.

As the demon in the mirror rounded a tree, the shadows of the *shayātīn* slithered out from gaps in the bark.

"Finish the mission."

It trudged onwards.

"Destroy the parasite."

One foot after the other.

"Remove any doubt."

It slipped and twisted an ankle, but the demon in the mirror trudged onwards, one foot after the other.

"Your fate is sealed."

Left foot.

"Join us."

Right foot.

"Among the worms."

They continued the chant, but the demon in the mirror trudged onwards, one foot after the other.

One of them rose above the rest, the towering spectre of overbearing might.

“Why do you delay?” He asked. “You have failed once already. Every second you delay is another second you curse this world with your existence, another second you fail your mission because of your *nafs*.”

“I need to see the northern lights,” the demon in the mirror said.

“Who cares about your needs?” He reproached. “You are a stupid, worthless, idiot child who should have never been born.”

The demon in the mirror did not answer. It kept going, one foot after the other.

“You are less than nothing,” He hissed. “Everything you touch is corrupted by your pathetic, worthless spirit. You were meant to die like a rat in a gutter, so inconsequential that you never existed at all.”

The rest of the *shayāṭīn* echoed His last words, repeating it endlessly.

The demon in the mirror tripped on a tree root. Beneath the snow was a partially frozen puddle, which soaked through the outer layer of mittens and coats. The demon in the mirror rolled away, but the frost rapidly froze its arms. It shivered uncontrollably as all sensation in its body disappeared.

The demon slumped against a tree, too tired to think or feel. From the pockets of the outermost parka, it shakily grasped the handle.

But it just could not do it. Even though it knew that its performance of British masculine content with Islamic forms sent it down the wrong path. Even though it knew the maiden died a year ago. Even though it knew that it owned nothing except some clothes, some food, and a rental car. Even though it knew that it never planned to live beyond its thirties. Even though it knew that it was going to die from frostbite in this canopy of black and white before finding the rental car. Even though it knew that it would never find the keys or phone again. In that domain,



there was nothing to doubt. Despite everything commanding it to do the rational choice, it just could not do it. The amygdala, cingulate cortex, and cerebellum were still stronger than the prefrontal cortex.

Instead, the demon in the mirror curled into a ball, trying its best to maintain its body heat. It closed its eyes, hoping to go to a better place. A place where the frozen roots turned into woodchips baking in the sun. A place where the black and white branches turned into a brilliant multi-coloured plastic playground. A place where the snowflakes turned into rays of sunlight and the cold became childish laughter.

\*\*\*

We ran laps around a playground under a sapphire sky. He was different from other parents, carrying a boundless energy that made the other children laugh. The scent of cigarettes on His leather coat did not matter. I do not remember what His face looked like, but those details did not matter. The only thing that mattered was the feeling. He had a face that matched the feeling of coming home to a fireplace after playing in the snow.

I wasn't friends with the other children, but that didn't matter. He was my first, last and only friend. I didn't need anyone else because He would always be there for me.

My stubby hands and feet tried to climb a miniature rock wall, but the excessive layers protecting me from the autumn winds made it impossible to grab on.

He lifted me up as if I was a feather and placed me on the playground. I ran across it while He followed behind. With tiny fingers, I grabbed a hold of chains from which a tire hung. The tire shook when I stepped on it, and I feared that I would slip and fall.

He was just beneath, encouraging me. Yet I was frozen in place, so He wrapped his hands around me, carrying me across. He told me I did such a good job, and even though I knew it was

a lie, I kept going, pushing it to the back of my mind.

He stretched out His arms at the bottom of a yellow slide. I slid down, waving my hands as if I was on a rollercoaster, and I was enveloped in the embrace of His leather coat. The scent of the cigarettes filled my nose, calming me the same way one would be calmed by the warmth of a fireplace.

As we walked home, wherever it was, we caught sight of someone's parents giving out apple slices to the rest of the kids. He said that I should go ask for one, but I couldn't. When we visited His friends and relatives, I knew I didn't belong with their children. Something just didn't click together, like puzzle pieces from different sets. I didn't understand their language either, so I just sat next to Him while He talked to their parents, getting so used to being lonely that it became my default. People were unpredictable, and so could not be trusted. He took me to the apple slices, but my mouth remained shut as I hid behind His legs, reverted to my most basic functions. He sighed and said something to get the apple slice for me. I took the slice in my stubby hands, tasting its sweetness, but while I ate, I noticed a look on His face that made me sad.

"I love you," He said, planting a kiss on my forehead. I heard that in certain cultures, especially East Asian cultures, it is difficult for parents to tell their kids outright that they love them, often relying on acts of service and sacrifice to express love. He had no such issues, liberally and openly making it known what He felt about me, for good and for ill.

Even though I knew it was a lie, I leaned into Him, allowing the scent of the fireplace to fill my nose as He gently caressed my hair. My eyelids grew heavy, but the sadness did not go away.

\*\*\*

“So why did you do this?” a voice from above lamented.

The demon in the mirror looked up and saw a half-rotted skull. A white beard was turned into tattered ropes, and the skin around the cheeks and lips swelled black. A mass of putrefaction spilled from its decaying mouth.

Worse were the eyes. One was a nesting ground, the other was glazed over like a dead fish, staring at something far, far away, but without the ability to focus on it.

The corpse seized the demon in the mirror with cold, iron hands, sharp fingers digging into the demon.

“My own father made me sit still as he swung a rod down on my hands,” it lamented. “He swung hard enough to tear the skin. When I first held you, I promised to never touch you in anger. Whatever you did, so long as it was *ḥalāl*, I would be happy.”

The corpse stretched out a hand to the demon in the mirror. Several knives and nails jutted out, and a flame sprouted forth, burning away the flesh until the corpse’s hand was reduced to bone and molten metal.

“Look at what you did to me. Now I burn forever because of you.”

It gouged deep, tearing and searing away.

“I thought my son would not hide anything from me. I thought we were closer than anyone else on this earth. I thought I raised a good Muslim who would prove to me that everything I endured, everything I suffered, everything I sacrificed, would be worth it.”

The nails and blades shred the demon in the mirror. It sent the demon reeling as material was torn away. The searing flames cauterized these wounds shut while bursting raw nerves. The demon bore the pain in silence, so the corpse wrapped its skeletal hands around the demon’s throat. The crushing force around its windpipe diminished its breath to short gulps, before its

throat was crushed too small even for that.

The demon could not bear it anymore, striking the corpse. It fell to the ground, its skull cracking open like an egg and a mass scurried out. The demon in the mirror ran away from the corpse as the rest of it burned.

It ran and ran and ran across hills and valleys and roads and mountains and cliffs. But the air grew so cold as the world was blanketed in ice and snow. The snow quickly covered its feet and ankles, forcing it to leap over the snow mounds. The hail of ice turned its skin clammy and its clothes heavy with frozen water. Its breath laboured to keep its muscles moving while breathing in the icy daggers. An eternity went by before its run was reduced to a jog, which was then reduced to a walk, which was then reduced to a shuffle, and then a crawl. Slowly but surely the demon's mind and body froze, its sweat turning to ice.

The demon looked back, and saw His crawling, burning corpse just behind. It was all for nothing.

The demon in the mirror crawled back to the corpse. It was the only source of warmth in this world. It hugged the demon, and even though the nails and knives and bones tore away at the demon, even though the flames burned the demon to a char, even though the demon knew it ruined His life, the demon got used to it. Skeletal hands wrapped around its neck, slowly crushing the windpipe, and this time it did not resist.

It looked up, and spanning the entirety of the empty sky was a black void around which an endless horizon of eyes upon eyes cast judgement on those below. As the eyes circled the abyss, the light warped and bent and disappeared in a violent mockery of the natural order. No human was meant to witness this. This must have been the true form of the *malā'ika*, an overwhelming devourer of worlds sent to enact the will of that unending and unfeeling

sovereign. Emanating from the void was the sound of a trumpet, so deafening that it shattered rock and snow and metal and bone and everything that lived, before drawing it all upwards towards annihilation. A machine of calculated extermination embodying that cosmic entity of perfect order. The celestial machine shattered the demon and the corpse like minced meat. Even more terrifying, the celestial machine shattered the links that bound family together, as if all those decades of sacrifice were nothing more than a rusted chain.

“*Yā Allāh!* Why did it have to be me?” He lamented with despair.

“*Yā Allāh!* Why did it have to be me?” He lamented with anger.

“*Yā Allāh!* Why was I cursed with a parasitic, worthless, subhuman abomination?”

\*\*\*

The demon in the mirror awoke in a cold sweat as its head split apart, violently shaking the layers of snow accumulating on top of it. The blizzard stopped, but the night sky was still obscured by clouds and trees, so dark the demon could not make out anything beyond the arm in front of it.

“This must be a nightmare,” it groaned. “This must be a nightmare. I am going to wake up.”

But it did not.

The forest was a pitch-black abyss, dark enough so that the snow was as black as ink, indistinguishable from everything else.

“Why did you make me like this?” the demon in the mirror yelled into the abyss. “What was the point of this?”

The skin of its dry, freezing lips cracked open from the yelling, and so too did the freezing skin around its lips. But the demon in the mirror received no response.

It ran through the abyss, tripping over ice and roots.

“Answer me! Was my life a joke? A game? A fairytale? Did any of it matter?”

The *shayāṭīn* laughed and cursed wherever it turned. Their shadows were inseparable from the endless abyss, enveloping all that exists.

“Go ahead!” the demon in the mirror yelled. “Laugh. Laugh at the foolish failure who was cursed by love. Laugh at the pathetic failure who thought they did not deserve to be happy. Laugh at the worthless failure who thought they had to suffer to make those who loved them happy.”

The laughter grew deafening, grinding the demon’s mind to dust.

“Worthless.”

“All you have sacrificed has amounted to nothing more than failure.”

“Subhuman.”

“Your sins are set in stone.”

“Abomination.”

“The greatest of losers. In this world and the next.”

“Worthless.”

“You should have never had a family.”

“Subhuman.”

“It is in your very nature to kill everything you touch.”

“Abomination.”

“You are a worthless failure who came from a worthless people.”

“Worthless.”

“A man who does not deserve a better life.”

“Subhuman.”

“You are less than nothing,”

“Abomination.”

“So inconsequential that you never existed at all.”

There was no escaping the nightmare. It was all that ever was and ever will be, until the end of time.

The demon in the mirror tore off all its upper layers and threw them across the snow.

From the parka, it grabbed the handle.

Shaky hands held the knife in the air as the demon screamed at the top of my lungs.

“Did I die already? Did you judge me already and send me to this stage of hell as punishment? Did you decide that *Jahannam* was where I became my own torturer? Did you decide that *Jahannam* was where I could see people happy without the ability to be happy myself?”

The abyss continued to laugh.

Was God laughing at the demon’s suffering in this stage of *Jahannam*? Was it the *malā’ika*? The *jinn*? The *shayāṭīn*? Those who acquired divine citizenship?

Everything that exists in this world and the next laughed, including the demon in the mirror, who joined the *shayāṭīn* as they beckoned it towards the next stage of *Jahannam*.

\*\*\*

The demon rested on a snow-covered log, the knife dropping from its hands, as clean as the day it was bought. It gazed up at the canopy of black and white branches, all of it appearing black as night by now, and cursed itself for its weak will.

The demon genuinely believed it was in hell. That was the only thing that could explain

the events leading it here. Hells of scalding water and blazing flames that char the skin probably exist (for many peoples in this world, their experience is not far off from that). But only in the true *Jahannam* would its prisoners also believe that they deserve it. Without that, they may convince themselves that hell is just a test of faith. For example, a Muslim who found themselves under the judgement of *Yāma* (the god of death in Indian religions) in *Naraka* (the hell realm in Indian religions) might convince themselves that they are being tested by God. The test will determine if the Muslim remains steadfast in the afterlife or if their faith is dependant on empirical beliefs. The Muslim will then claim to be a martyr of God, and God will (presumably) save them from this test and allow them to enter *Jannāt*. A non-Muslim enduring *Jahannam* may make similar arguments by applying gnostic cosmology separating the True God from powerful malevolent demons with provisional control over aspects of life and death like the demiurge.

Most Muslim would probably reject such unorthodox beliefs, proclaiming that tests are only a feature of mortal life and that the hereafter only contains straightforward rewards and punishments. They do not realize that tests are one of the most potent forms of punishment. They may also proclaim that since this belief is not mentioned in the *Qur'ān*, it is unlikely to exist. They do not realize that if such tests were confirmed, their purposes would be nullified. Others may reject the relevance of non-Islamic cosmologies, but there are various avenues to reasonably integrate these cosmologies.

Regardless, the true *Jahannam* must have been designed in a way that prevents such ways of thinking from arising in the heads of its prisoners. Thus, the true *Jahannam* (at least its initial stages) must force the prisoner to create their own hell. Humans have already figured this out to some extent. The 1983 CIA *Human Resources Exploitation Training Manual* (a euphemism for interrogation and torture) does not advocate for going directly to physical torture.



It prefers techniques that employ human psychology (i.e.: using placebos to convince someone they have been given a truth serum to remove blame for cooperation, bombarding the subject with confusing questions that push them to reveal more information than initially intended). It may also prefer techniques that saps the subject's strength (i.e.: having to maintain one bodily position for a long time), leaves them permanently anxious/uncomfortable (i.e.: disrupting clocks, meals, schedules and depriving them of natural light to disorient their sense of time passing so there is no regular pattern), and isolates them (i.e.: solitary confinement).

That was the only way the demon could have killed the only people who ever loved it. This world must be the first stage of hell. It was given a choice designed to make it manufacture its own hell. It could betray its parents, contradict its orthodox religion, and endure the violence and persecution experienced by Rosario, Habib, and the other queer people it read about. Or it could suppress the *nafs* for His sake and the sake of what it considered religious integrity, convinced that this was the only way to protect itself from this world and the next. The choice was obvious. The threat of coercion destroys resistance more effectively than coercion itself. Only now that it is too late did the poison plaguing its choice unveil itself, shattering its mind so much that it would seek out the pus and scalding water awaiting in the next stage of hell. This is what the demon believed from its amygdala to its prefrontal cortex to its cerebellum to its brain stem.

And yet the demon still could not do it, even while shivering in this abyss, the pins and needles in its extremities giving way to numbness. Every inhale of the frigid air sent tiny little knives cutting the insides of its throat and nose. It tried alternating between deep and shallow breaths, but that was just the worst of both worlds.

The demon's migraine took on a thumping sensation timed to its heartbeat. It groaned as

its vision blurred, its consciousness drifting far away.

But at the very edge of its vision, I saw it.

A gap in the canopy of black and white, barely larger than a fist. Beyond that gap, the clouds were drifting, and a star could be seen, along with wisps of green which illuminated the abyss.

I inched like a worm for a better look.

The wisps turned into green and blue bands, which turned red, then purple. A gust of wind passed over, breaking some of the branches above, and despite my blurry vision, I saw her.

She was there. Among the stars. Among the green and blue and red and purple. She shuffled, swayed, and spun like a ballet dancer. Fluid welled up in my eyes.

The bands of colours spread out across the sky, turning pink, yellow, and orange. I did not know that the northern lights could create such colours.

These bands of colours coalesced, and she was joined by her beloved lady. They were like twins, leaping and swinging and twisting in perfect symmetry, ending in an embrace. More bands coalesced, and she was hugged by her mother and father, who loved her no matter what.

I blinked, and for the first time in known memory, the fluid did not disappear. The tear flowed down dry cheeks. Then another tear flowed, and another, until a stream of warm salt water dripped onto ice.

She danced with overflowing spirit, and they joined her, along with many more maidens like her. They were then joined by gentlemen and gentlepersons who shared in her struggles and triumphs.

Our eyes darted across the canopy of black and white. Most of the sky was covered in darkness, but in several places, wisps of green and blue and red and purple and pink and yellow

and orange pushed through, from which danced more maidens. Muslim maidens. Jewish maidens. Christian maidens. Canadian maidens. Congolese maidens. Arab maidens. Palestinian maidens. Ukrainian maidens. Uyghur maidens. Rohingya maidens. Tigrayan maidens. Sudanese maidens. Yemeni maidens. Bengali maidens. *Jummā* maidens. Hawaiian maidens. Crimean Tatar maidens. *Seneca* maidens. *Wendat* maidens. Maidens of the *Mississaugas of the Credit*. And many more. They were dancing, leaping across the sky, unbound by borders, all to ensure nobody danced alone.

With the tears came sniffles, and we groaned from the migraine. We took deep, slow breathes, knowing that we were just on the cusp of shattering the dam preventing decades of emotions from flooding out.

From one gap in the canopy of black and white, we noticed the edge of the crescent moon. He was always fascinated by the moon, wishing He could figure out how Muslim astronomers understood the patterns in the moon and stars to predict the passing of months in the Islamic lunar calendar and precisely determine the direction of the *qibla*. He habitually recited verse 190 of *Sūra Āl 'Imrān* (The Family of Imran) whenever we saw the moon on our walks back home from the '*Ishā*' *ṣalāh*. He also played the recitation of various esteemed *Qāri*' (a person who recites the *Qur'ān* with the proper rules of recitation) just before going to bed. All those *Qāri*' were men, yet this did not prevent me from listening to millions of voices from millions of faces with a million colours and genders and nations and creeds, their melodious chorus flowing far above the canopy of black and white:

“*Inna fī khalqī l-samāwāti wal-arḍi* (Indeed, in the creation of the heavens/sky and the earth) *wa-kh'tilāfī l-layli wal-nahāri* (and the alternation of the night and day) *laāyātin li-ulī l-albāb* (are signs for those of understanding).”

Verses 190 to 200 of *Sūra Āl 'Imrān* are often recited as a prayer to *Allāh*. They contain supplications asking forgiveness for one's sins, entrance into Paradise, and protection from the Hellfire awaiting the wrongdoers. Even though these verses were embedded into our prefrontal cortex, they never entered our hearts. The hellfire always reminded us that God was psychologically incomprehensible. Nonetheless, millions of voices flowed from ear to ear:

*Alladhīna yadhkurūna l-laha* (Those who remember *Allāh*) *qiyāman waqu 'ūdan wa 'alā junūbihim* (standing and sitting and on their sides) *wayatafakkarūna fī khalqī l-samāwāti wal-arḍ* (and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth), *rabbānā mā khalaqta hādihā bāṭilan* ([saying,] Our Lord, You have not created all this without purpose).

*Sub'hānaka* (Glory be to You) *faqinā* (so save us) *'adhāba l-nār* (from the punishment of the Fire).

The sights and sounds shattered everything within us, including everything that was already shattered. In all the years of studying *fiqh* and *ḥādīth* and politics and history and trying to hold ourselves accountable to a strict moral code, not once did we receive a real *āyah* (sign, miracle). Our faith never left the prefrontal cortex. For thirty years we told ourselves that we sacrificed too much to let go of His God. For thirty years we told ourselves that His God did not want us to flourish in this world or the next. For thirty years we told ourselves to worship Him and His notion of God even though we knew that it was warped by the conquerors of the world. These rationalizations for nihilism were swept away like dust as our entire being took in the *ikh'tilāf* (alternation) of the *layl* (night) in the *samāwāt* (heavens/sky):

*Rabbānā innaka man tud'khili l-nāra* (Our Lord, indeed whom You admit to the Fire) *faqad akhẓaytah* (You have disgraced him), *wamā lilẓẓālimīna min anṣār* (and never will the wrongdoers find any helpers). *Rabbānā innanā sami 'nā* (Our Lord, indeed we heard)

*munādiyan yunādī lil'īmāni* (a caller calling to the faith) *an āminū birabbikum faāmannā* (“Believe in your Lord,” and we have believed). *Rabbanā fa-gh'fir lanā dhunūbanā* (Our Lord! Forgive us our sins) *wakaffir 'annā sayyiātina* (and remove from us our evil deeds), *watawaffanā ma 'a l-abrār* (and cause us to die with the righteous).

We cried for our mama. We cried for our baba. We cried for an end to the nightmare and an end to our part in it. We cried for an end to the cycles of *waswas* destroying our souls. We cried for a life worth living. We cried and cried and cried and cried as the majesty of God's creation carved a path of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple through the abyss:

*Rabbanā waātinā mā wa 'adtanā 'alā rusulika* (Our Lord, grant us what You promised us through Your Messengers) *walā tukh'zinā yawma l-qiyyāma* (and do not disgrace us on the Day of the Resurrection), *innaka lā tukh'lifu l-mī'ād* (indeed, You do not break Your Promise).

We crawled to the clothes in the snow while crying like a newborn child. We wrung out as much water as we could with our frostbitten hands before putting them on. We crawled, then trudged, pushing through the pain. We noticed the glint of the knife. It was still shrouded in darkness, just beyond the path carved out by the northern lights. A shadowy figure arose from the knife, beckoning us towards it. Yet we did not go astray. It was drowned out by millions of voices from millions of faces reminding us to live:

*Fa-s'tajāba lahum rabbuhum* (Then responded their Lord), *Annī lā uđī'u* (Never will I allow to be lost) *'amala 'āmilin minkum* (the work of any of you) *min dhakarim aw unthā* (whether male or female). *Ba 'dukum min ba 'd* (You are one of another), *fa-lladhīna hājarū wa-ukh'rijū min diyārihim* (so those who emigrated and were driven out from their homes), *waūdhū fī sabīlī waqātalū waqutilū* (and were harmed in My Cause and who

fought and were killed), *la-ukaffiranna* 'anhum sayyiātihim (surely, I will remove from them their evil deeds), *wala-ud'khilannahum* (and surely I will admit them) *jannātin tajrī min taḥtihā l-anhār* (to Gardens under which rivers flow), *thawāban min 'indi l-lah* (a reward from *Allāh*), *wal-lahu* (and *Allāh*), *'indahū ḥus'nu l-thawāb* (with Him is the best reward).

We followed the path, wherever it took us. If it led us to the end, so be it. If it led us out of the abyss, so be it:

*Lā yaghurrannaka* (Do not be deceived) *taqallubu lladhīna kafarū fī l-bilād* (by the affluence of those who disbelieved in the land). *Matā 'un qalīlun* (It is but a small enjoyment); *thumma mawāhum jahannam* (then their final refuge is Hell), *wabi'sa l-mihād* (and wretched is that place for rest). *Lākini lladhīna ttaqaw rabbahum* (But those who are mindful of their Lord), *lahum jannātun tajrī min taḥtihā l-anhāru* (will have gardens beneath which rivers flow), *khālidīna fīhā* (abiding eternally therein), *nuzulan min 'indi l-lah* (as accommodation from *Allāh*). *Wamā 'inda l-lahi khayrun lil'abrār* (And that which is with *Allāh* is best for the righteous).

Millions of voices with a million colours and genders reminded us that there is no wait for admission into God's promised land. Millions of voices from a million nations and creeds reminded us that we were never cast out of God's promised land.

*Wa-inna min ahli l-kitābi* (And indeed, among the People of the Scripture) *laman yu'minu bil-lahi* (are those who believe in God) *wamā unzila ilaykum wamā unzila ilayhim* (in what has been sent down to you and in what was sent down to them), *khāshi 'īna lillah* (humbling themselves before God). *Lā yashtarūna biāyāti l-lahi thamanan qalīla* (They do not sell God's revelation for a small price). *Ulāika lahum ajruhum 'inda rabbihim*

(These people will have their rewards with their Lord). *Inna l-laha sarī‘u l-ḥisāb* (Indeed, *Allāh* is swift in taking the account).

Millions of voices from millions of faces with a million colours and genders and nations and creeds reminded us that we must only look beyond the canopy of black and white.

*Yāayyuhā lladhīna āmanū* (O you who believe), *ṣ‘birū* (Be steadfast) *waṣābirū* (and be patient) *warābiṭū* (and be constant) *wa-ttaqū l-laha* (and be mindful of *Allāh*) *la ‘allakum tuf‘liḥūn* (so that you may be successful).

**Notes and Bibliography**